Boogiepop returns

VS Imaginator Part 2

ブギーポップ・リターンズ
VSイマジネーター

上遠野浩平
Kouhei Kadono

“It is my function to remake the world.”

This is it...the climactic final showdown between Boogiepop and the deadly "Imaginator!" With the lives of millions in Tokyo hanging in the balance, only Boogiepop and a group of ragtag young teens stand a chance of combating the forces of evil and preventing a deadly virus from being unleashed.

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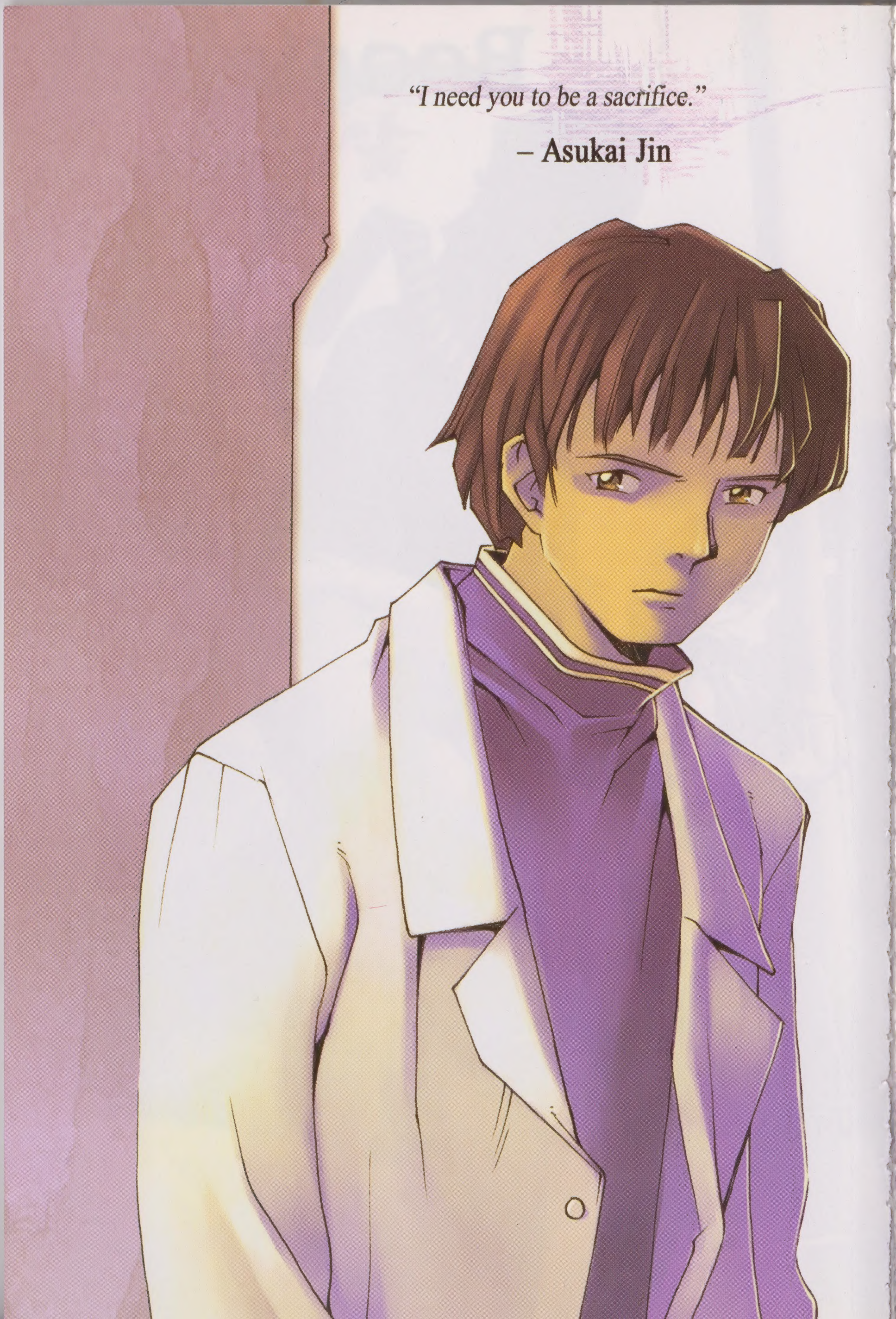
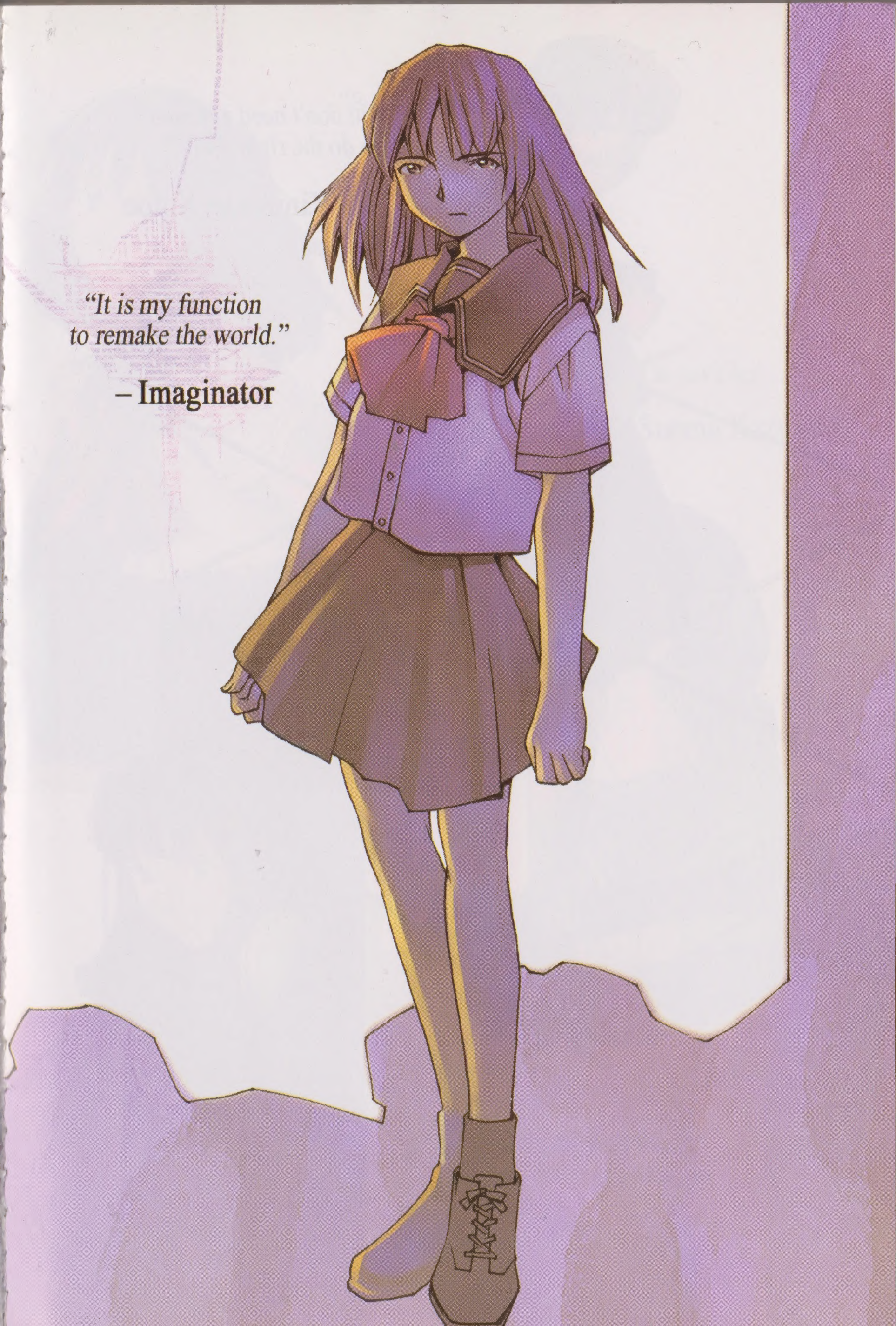
VS Imaginator Part 2

上遠野浩平
Kouhei Kadono



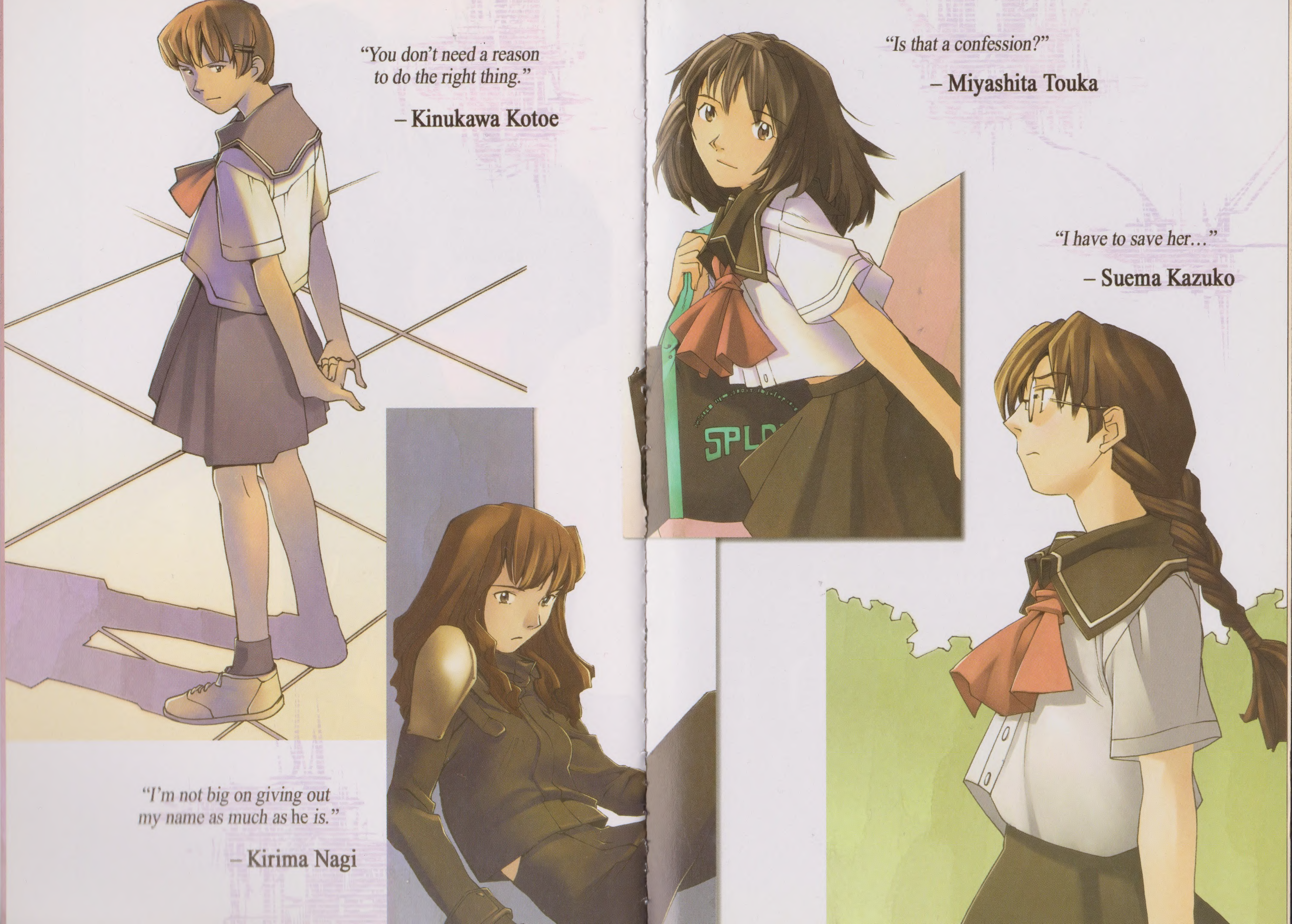
"I need you to be a sacrifice."

– Asukai Jin



"It is my function to remake the world."

– Imaginator



"You don't need a reason to do the right thing."

– Kinukawa Kotoe

"I'm not big on giving out my name as much as he is."

– Kirima Nagi

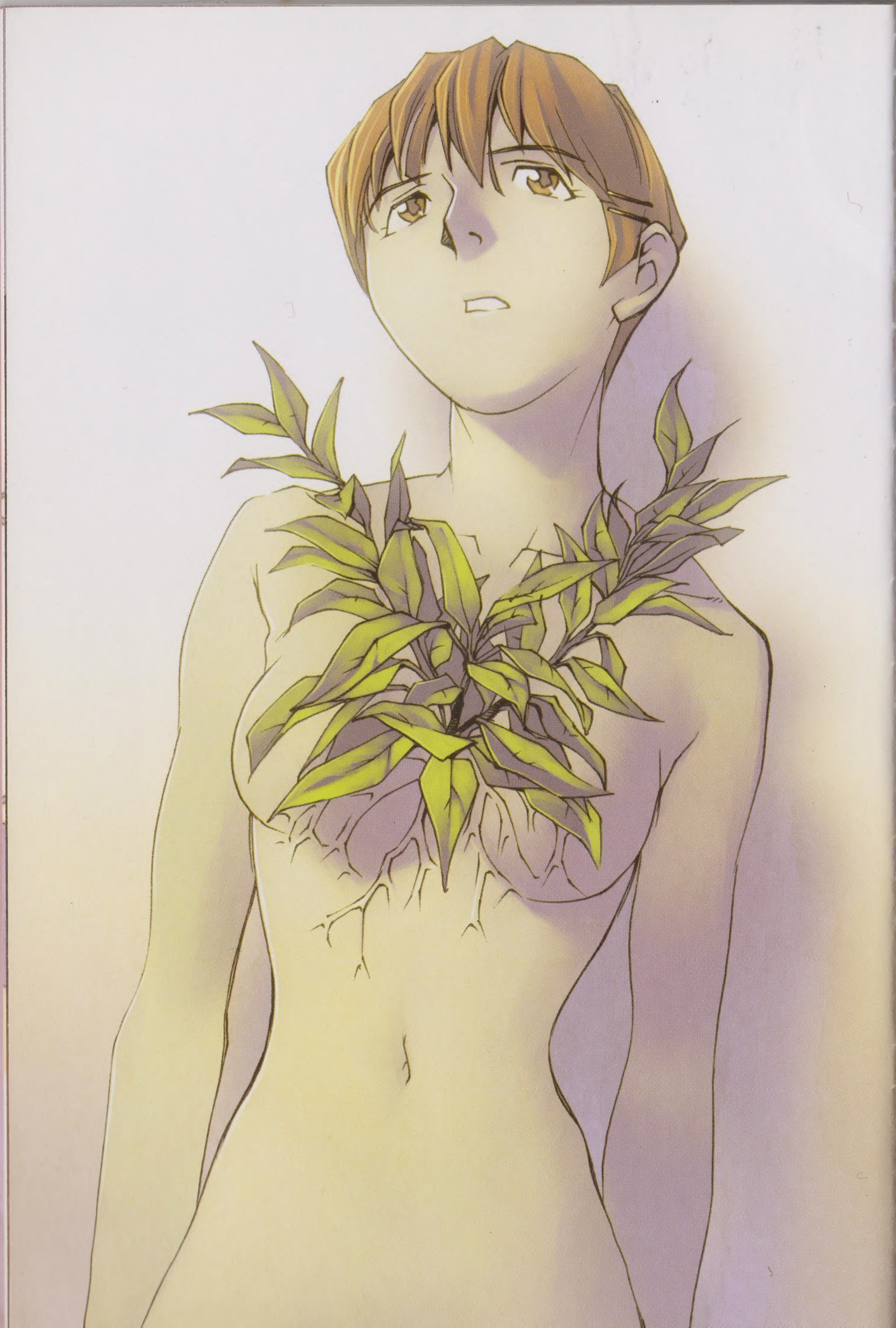
"Is that a confession?"

– Miyashita Touka

"I have to save her…"

– Suema Kazuko

Boogiepop returns
VS Imaginator Part 2
PARADE



Boogiepop
returns
VS Imaginator Part 2

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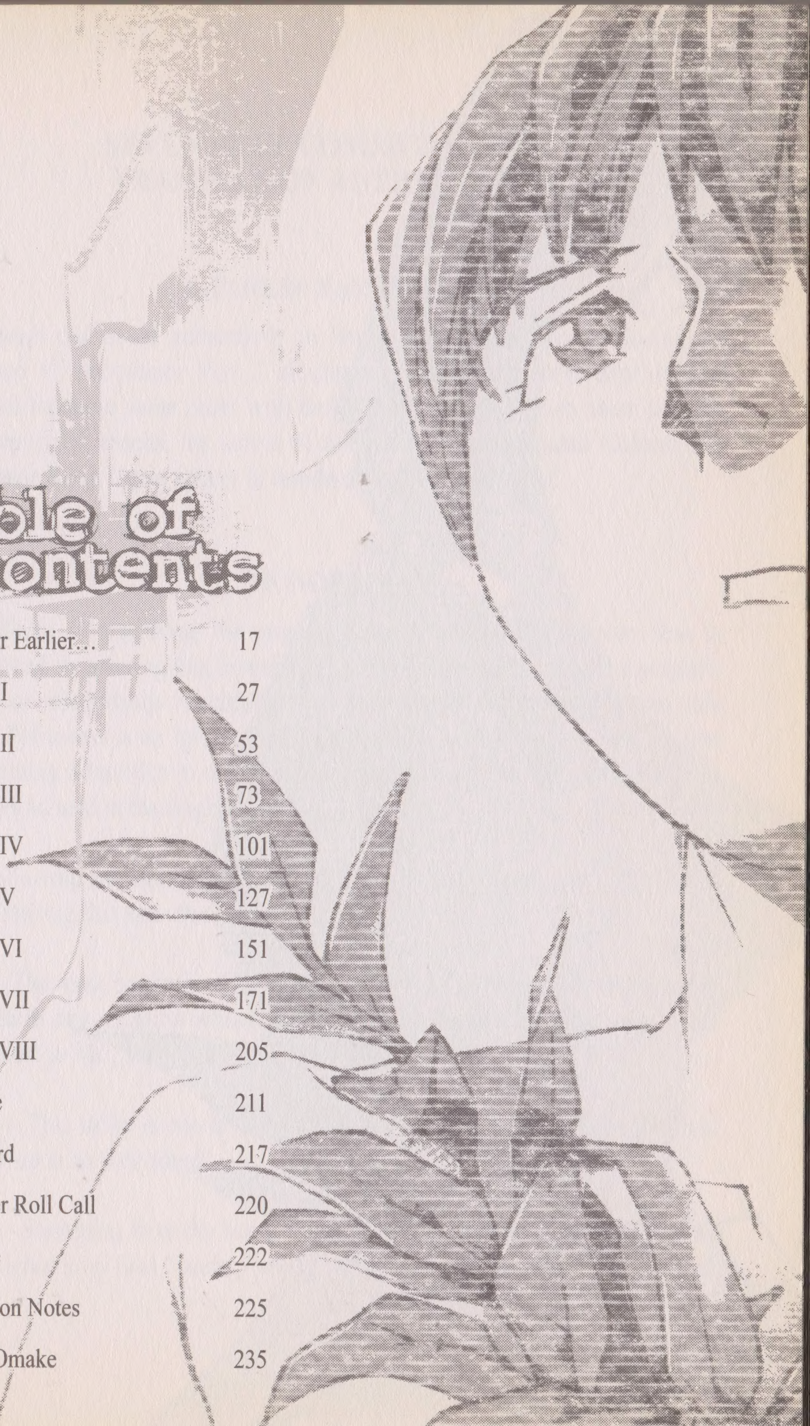


SEVEN SEAS' COMMITMENT TO TRANSLATION AUTHENTICITY

JAPANESE NAME ORDER

To ensure maximum authenticity in Seven Seas' translation of *Boogiepop Returns: VS Imaginator Part 2*, all character names have been kept in their original Japanese name order with family name first and given name second. For copyright reasons, the names of *Boogiepop* creator Kouhei Kadono and illustrator Kouji Ogata appear in standard English name order.

HONORIFICS

In addition to preserving the original Japanese name order, Seven Seas is committed to ensuring that honorifics—polite speech that indicates a person's status or relationship towards another individual—are retained within this book. Politeness is an integral facet of Japanese culture and we believe that maintaining honorifics in our translations helps bring out the same character nuances as seen in the original work.

The following are some of the more common honorifics you may come across while reading this and other books:

-san – The most common of all honorifics, it is an all-purpose suffix that can be used in any situation where politeness is expected. Generally seen as the equivalent to Mr., Miss, Ms., Mrs., etc.

-sama – This suffix is one level higher than "-san" and is used to confer great respect upon an individual.

-dono – Stemming from the word "tono," meaning "lord," "-dono" signifies an even higher level than "-sama," and confers the utmost respect.

-kun – This suffix is commonly used at the end of boys' names to express either familiarity or endearment. It can also be used when addressing someone younger than oneself or of a lower status.

-chan – Another common honorific. This suffix is mainly used to express endearment towards girls, but can also be used when referring to little boys or even pets. Couples are also known to use the term amongst each other to convey a sense of cuteness and intimacy.

Sempai – This title is used towards one's senior or "superior" in a particular group or organization. "Sempai" is most often used in a school setting, where underclassmen refer to upperclassmen as "sempai," though it is also commonly said by employees when addressing fellow employees who hold seniority in the workplace.

Kouhai – This is the exact opposite of "sempai," and is used to refer to underclassmen in school, junior employees at the workplace, etc.

Sensei – Literally meaning "one who has come before," this title is used for teachers, doctors, or masters of any profession or art.

Oniisan – This title literally means "big brother." First and foremost, it is used by younger siblings towards older male siblings. It can be used by itself or attached to a person's name as a suffix (-niisan). It is often used by a younger person toward an older person unrelated by blood, but as a sign of respect. Other forms include the informal "oniichan" and the more respectful "oniisama."

Oneesan – This title is the opposite of "Oniisan" and means "big sister." Other forms include the informal "oneechan" and the more respectful "oneesama."

A new possibility…
occasionally consumes all things like itself…
before self-destructing.

— **Kirima Seiichi (*VS Imaginator*)**

One year earlier...

Just before dawn, the coldest wind of the day swept across the world.

A girl was standing at the edge of the silent school roof.

"..........."

The wind whipped her long hair about roughly, as if trying to tear it out.

Unaffected, she stared back at the shadowy figure that stood with her on the roof.

"It's a shame, really," she said with a thoroughly groundless and unsettling smile floating across her face. Not because she was happy, not because she was amused, nor even because she was, instead, much too sad—there was no reason for it. She just smiled, but with her eyes alone—her mouth remained locked in a straight line.

"Ultimately, you too are unable to free yourself from the 'here' and 'now.' Such a shame."

"..........." The other figure remained silent. It resembled a pipe more than a human with the shadow of the school building enveloping it, leaving it only partially visible.

"But no matter how long you wait, nothing will ever begin. Eventually, you will float mournfully away, just as your name suggests…vanish with a little *pop*."

She put her hand to her mouth. Her shoulders shook slightly.

She was laughing.

The gesture was incredibly natural. How was it possible for anyone to laugh so unaffectedly? It was quite a mystery.

If her feet shifted a mere ten centimeters, they would find themselves heading swiftly towards a sharp impact with the ground below. But this precarious position had no influence on her laughter.

"………"

The shadow beside her didn't move. It showed no signs of emotion. It was as if it didn't even know what laughter was.

"Don't you agree, Boogiepop?"

Addressed by name, the shadow stepped forward.

"Say what you will. Either way, you are finished here. There is nothing else for you." The shadow's voice was somewhere neutrally between that of both male and female genders.

"Hmmm…finished? Really?" The girl failed to flinch before the advancing shadow. She stood her ground. "I think I've barely begun. I don't even have a name yet…"

A cloud lit ever so slightly by the rays of the rising sun passed by in the darkened sky above. The wind was extremely strong.

"Then I shall name you now. Existences like yours were dubbed “Imaginator” by the father of the Fire Witch.”

The shadow continued towards the girl, feet never pausing. The girl was unmoved. She nodded quietly.

“I read that book too. But it’s an awfully prosaic name, isn’t it? It lacks romance. How unlike you,” she said, mockingly.

Her long black hair was now pulled at an almost perfect right angle to her head, as if pouring ink into the river of air around them.

“Romance…? I have no such thing. Only *normal* humans do,” the shadow said, producing an arm from beneath the cloak that covered its body. There was a knife in its hand.

Faced with the blade’s sinister gleam, the girl’s lips at last curved upwards.

Curled into a look of pure confidence.

“‘Love is like snow that falls in April. Unexpected, yet not unforeseen…out of season, it chills you to the core.’ Who was it that said *that*?”

“……!” The shadow stopped in its tracks.

Because the girl had taken a step backwards, there was nothing behind her and nothing below her.

“The end of the beginning is also the beginning of the end, Boogiepop. You stopped me here…but that is just the beginning of the next ending.”

Smiling broadly, the girl’s body plunged from the roof, falling towards the garden below.

There was an ugly, unpleasant sound. The sound of something splattering.

"…………"

The shadow stood where it was. It did not rush to the edge and look down.

It did not need to.

A vision of the girl floated in thin air in front of the shadow.

"I have plenty of time before I actually hit the ground. Will you be able to find me before I do?"

The vision smiled—once again, only with its eyes.

Then it gradually faded away, melting into the air.

"…………"

Left behind, the shadow stood, knife in hand.

The wind stopped.

The sudden silence gave the impression that all movement had left the world.

On the ground below, a body lay, broken open like a flower that has bloomed. The stain it left behind would take a great deal of time to remove.

But that was all a year ago…

Boogiepop returns
VS Imaginator Part 2

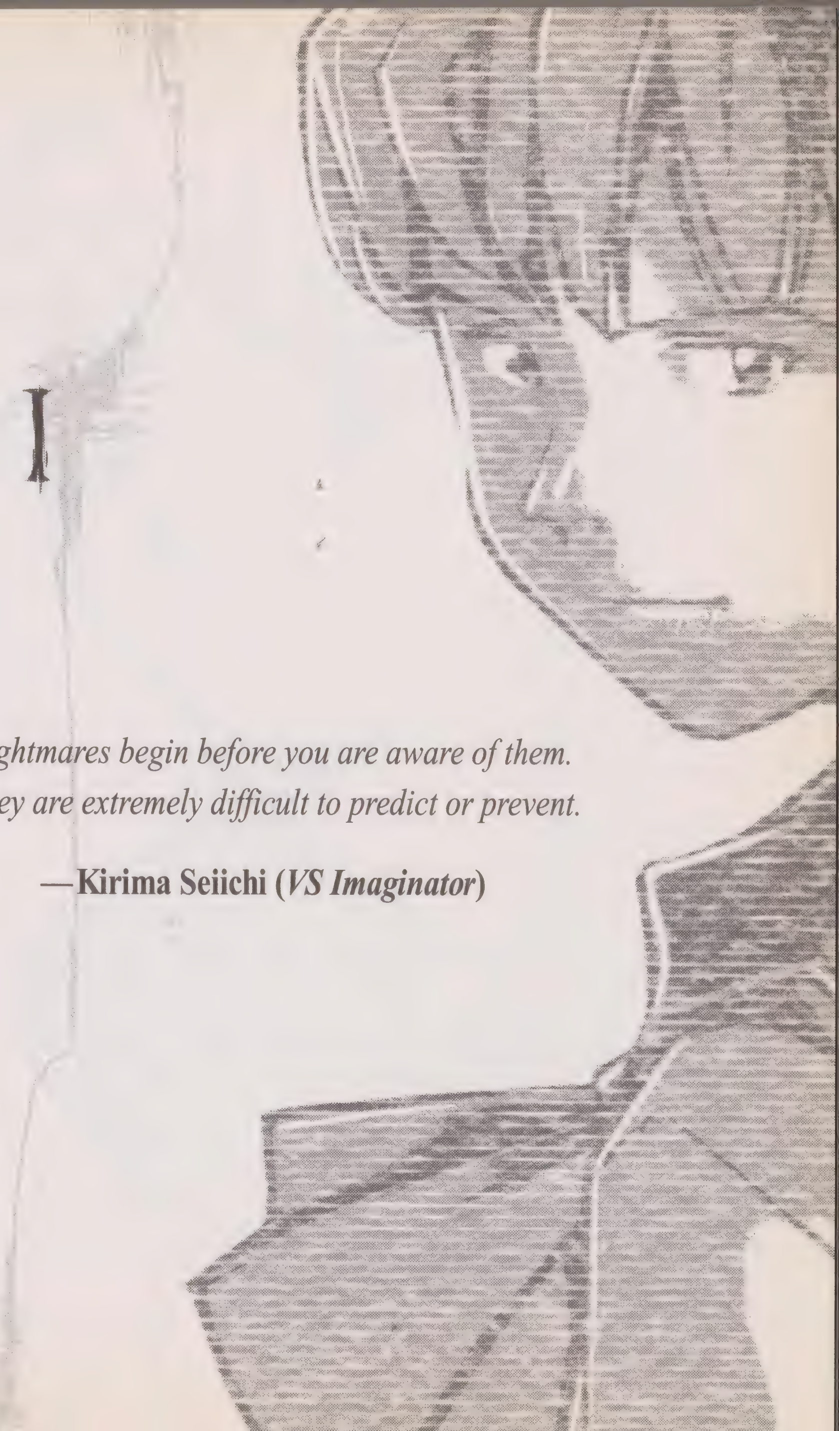
PARADE

INCLUDING
"Do U Lie?"
and "The Sacrifice of Victor"

I

Nightmares begin before you are aware of them.
They are extremely difficult to predict or prevent.

—Kirima Seiichi (*VS Imaginator*)



The mountain was not far from the city center. It had been carefully leveled off, with staircases built up the slopes. But despite the size of it, there was nobody there. The earth was exposed, with nothing growing or living on it besides a few tufts of brown grass barely managing to get through the winter alive. In a few more weeks, weeds would spring up everywhere, and the ground would look even less pleasant, but for the moment, it was simply desolate. Piles of steel and other building supplies lay abandoned, never to be used, near half-constructed towers left to forlornly rust away.

Five years before, there had been plans to turn this mountain into an amusement park, with the groundwork having been completed three years ago. But problems with the developers had led to the land becoming repossessed by the bank, which in turn tried, unsuccessfully, to put the land up for auction. Unable to find any buyers, the lot ended up abandoned, the amusement park construction frozen, waiting absently in the faint hope of things getting worked out.

The land was surrounded by a tall fence that cast long shadows in the sunset, like stripes across the ground.

A large round shadow fell across those stripes, and leaping down inside the fence came the silhouette of an almost spherical human. As he vaulted the two and a half meter tall fence, his graying hair flew upwards, displaying the torn up flesh where his right ear had once been.

It was Spooky E. An overloaded convenience store bag hung from his left hand.

He clicked his tongue, and fussily straightened his hair.

Through the knotted hair, he scratched at his wound. Blood welled up, getting into his hair, but Spooky E paid it no mind, and kept on scratching, putting his nails into it. It had been almost a month since his ear had been sliced off, but his incessant scratching had prevented the wound from healing. As a synthetic human, Spooky E's healing abilities were far greater than those of an average human, but he was scratching it so persistently that his abilities were unable to compensate.

As his fingers carved away, he walked further into the unfinished amusement park.

He reached a strangely-shaped tower, like a spiral reaching towards the sky.

The entrance was blocked—not only bolted shut, but also wrapped in chains.

"…………" Spooky E never even glanced at it. He took a short step backwards.

And, just as he had the fence, he crouched down and took a flying leap all the way up to the third floor, through the empty window frame.

The floor inside was covered in dust, and garbage carried by the wind was strung here and there. Kicking the mess out of his way, Spooky E stumped across the floor towards the inner staircase. The elevator was an empty shaft, and even if it had been finished, there was no power.

He climbed to the top floor, which was the only one that had had glass placed into its window frames. Viewing this sight, it was as if the construction crew had been working from the top down.

"................."

At last, Spooky E stopped picking at his wounded ear, and sat down in the middle of the empty floor, taking out of the plastic bag *onigiri* and a pair of sandwiches. It was his lunch, and he was starving.

As if a thought had just struck him, he took one of the cell phones that hung at his waist, and dialed at an unsettling speed, all ten digits in less than a second.

The phone barely had time to ring before a girl answered. "This is Kasugai."

"Command 700259," Spooky E said, cramming an entire ham sandwich into his mouth.

"Understood. Command accepted," the girl's voice became suddenly mechanical. "Preparation complete. Awaiting details."

"Go to the city library and get the key hidden between the Hungarian Dictionary and the Hungarian Phrase Book."

"Understood."

"The key is for a coin locker at the station. Take the medicine inside and pour it into the drinks at the fast food restaurant you work at. One tab for every three liters."

"Understood."

"That's all. Command 700259, transmission complete."

"Understood. Transmission complete. Proceeding to action."

Spooky E hung up.

He put the phone back on his belt, took off another one, and dialed another number.

"Who is it?" snapped an angry-sounding boy.

"Command 5400129," Spooky E muttered.

"Understood," the boy said instantly, his voice turning mechanical, just like the girl's had.

"How many members are on your team currently?"

"Seven."

"Not enough. Make it twelve. This week."

"Understood. How?"

"I don't *care*. Threaten them, force them, just get them in your group."

"Understood."

"When you have twelve, take to the streets, and cause a disturbance between Sixth Street and Eighth Street. Report who fights back."

"Understood."

In this instance, "disturbance" meant extortion and theft.

As he was speaking, a different phone on Spooky E's waist began vibrating.

Unhurriedly, Spooky E continued his conversation with the boy. Finally, he concluded with, "That's all. Command 5400129, transmission complete."

"Understood."

Only then did he finally answer the incoming call.

"What?!"

"FS450036 Periodic Report." The voice sounded like an adult woman in her late twenties. But once again, it lacked expression, and was totally mechanical.

"Any problems?"

"70% of the spiked cream has been sold. 70% of all customers have come back to the shop, but there have been no noticeable changes."

"Send the details like always. Begin stage two on the spiked customers…regardless of results."

"Understood."

In this fashion, from this forgotten, deserted location, munching on convenience store junk food, Spooky E continued giving instructions to the "Terminals" he had brainwashed and hidden throughout the city. He made a seemingly endless series of calls, while receiving an equally endless number. How many people had he brainwashed? Apparently, an unimaginable number. He was like a scalper with tickets for all the hottest gigs.

They divided roughly into two camps—those who gave people drugs, and those who observed the results.

But there were also a few unrelated calls.

"They say he comes out near the expressway overpass."

"Someone saw him running along the river."

"Rumor has it a shadow like him was seen on the Twin City roof."

Calls like that.

These calls always made Spooky E sullen. Especially the third one, where he shouted, "I know!" into the phone.

"Shit!" he roared, once the flood of calls subsided. "God damn that Boogiepop!"

He ground his teeth so hard that blood spurted out of his ear stub.

He thrust his hand into the plastic bag, but it was empty, simply making a dismal rustle.

"Son of a bitch!"

He tore the bag to pieces.

Flinging the garbage aside, he stomped up to the tower roof, footsteps echoing.

(Unforgivable! I'm gonna tear him apart with my bare hands!!)

On the roof, a strong wind was blowing, just like it had when he faced his 'enemy.'

(He mentioned the Manticore…that fugitive Tarkus was after. But it sounds like he already finished it off…but I'm not telling Axis about him! He's my prey! Nobody else's!)

He glared at the seven cylinders that stood on the roof.

They didn't really stand out much among the other building supplies left abandoned here. Even if someone were to notice them, they would never guess they had been placed here much later. But inside each of them was a 'disinfectant' strong enough to bring 'death' to every living thing around.

(If it comes to it, I'll use these on him if I have to.)

Blood spurted out of his ear stump again. He stopped it with his hands, and whispered, "But…but that other name he said…'Imaginator.' What the hell is that?"

Spooky E stood for a moment glumly, then his expression suddenly sharpened, and he glared down at the park below him.

"Mm…?"

Someone was standing at the locked gate at the entrance to the park.

It was a woman…no, a girl. And it looked as though she was dressed in her uniform, on her way home from high school.

She did something at the gate, and, surprisingly, the lock opened. She had a key.

"Well, now…" Spooky E grinned as he watched the girl enter the park.

***

"Ow! Damn, cut myself!" Kinukawa Kotoe sucked the tip of her finger, scratched by one of the barbs on the fence around the abandoned amusement park. The taste of blood filled her mouth. "What am I *doing*?"

She reached into her school bag and took out one of the cartoon rabbit decorated band-aids that she always had with her, and wrapped it around her wound.

She felt very childish. Like she was three years old again.

Nobody knew she had a key to the half-finished Paisley Park construction site. One of the countless companies with a claim on the ground belonged to her father, and when he brought the master key home, Kotoe had snuck out of the house with it and made a copy.

Ever since, it had become her secret hideout when she was feeling depressed.

The buildings in the park had been abandoned just after construction began, so they looked more like abstract sculptures than anything else, and the curved walking paths were all bare, waiting patiently for beautiful tiles to be laid upon them. But as Kotoe looked at the buildings as she walked, she felt as if she was about to cry a river.

It was a very lonely place, and while she might have been a cheerful girl at home and at school, something about the desolate, deserted park tugged at her heartstrings. She had never told anyone about it, but…

Part of her was convinced that she belonged in a place like this.

Like there was something fundamentally missing inside of her—a draft blowing through the cracks in her heart.

This place, where they had tried to build a spectacular amusement park, was now a forgotten, pathetic little dream—the kind of dream everyone has when they are young, but never achieves, only to become abandoned with time. Kotoe felt like she had never had that sort of dream at all.

Of course, this seventeen-year-old girl was not consciously aware of this. But she indistinctly felt it, and this sadness remained inside of her, refusing to melt away.

She walked on through the ruins, painted by the light of the setting sun.

As she did, she thought about the only thing she ever thought about these days—her cousin, Asukai Jin.

(Jin-niisan…)

She first met Asukai Jin when she was five years old, and she remembered it clearly, even now.

Jin's father had come to borrow money from his younger brother, Kotoe's father, and Jin had come along with him. He must still have been in elementary school.

She had only seen him from a distance.

Kotoe's father had taken his wife's name, Kinukawa, and he behaved like the rightful heir, much more so than Kotoe's docile mother. He had thundered, "Stop begging," to his brother.

But Jin's father had persisted, until Jin said, quietly, "Uncle Kouji's right, Father. Nobody would lend money to someone who just wants it without any plan for using it."

When that clean boy soprano cut through the tension in the drawing room (decorated perfectly to her father's tastes), Kotoe had the strangest feeling that this boy would take her away from everything—away from this life where she lacked nothing but could scarcely breathe.

Much to her father's surprise, his brother agreed with his son Jin, and abandoned his attempts to beg for money based solely upon familial blood ties, and instead began to explain the details of his business plan.

Kotoe didn't really understand the conversation from that point on, but ultimately, Kotoe's father did end up lending his brother some money. What Kotoe remembered was how Jin's farewell showed far better manners than his father's.

He seemed so noble.

He was her first love.

She had looked forward to seeing him again, but it turned out that the start-up business that Jin's father had founded with the borrowed money had gone bust. They didn't return to Kotoe's house for a very long time. Occasionally, her father would refer to his brother as "that good-for-nothing," which always made Kotoe extremely sad.

It was four years before Kotoe met Jin again.

Father and son called at the Kinukawa home once more. The father was extremely well-dressed, and surprisingly, he returned the money that he had borrowed. Plus interest.

Kotoe's father muttered, "Normally, you would also have to pay damages…" but he was clearly happy to have the money back.

"But how did you get it?" he asked, but Jin's father just grinned.

His son sat next to him, in the uniform from his junior high school. He didn't appear bored by the grown ups' conversation, but he also did not appear to be excessively interested either.

He blended in so easily, and Kotoe, who was watching from the shadows, was mystified by this.

"Say, Kouji, would you like a painting?"

"Painting?"

"First rate artists only. I'm in that line of work now."

"*You* sell paintings? You got a D in art! How do you know you aren't selling fakes?"

"I leave all that up to him," he said, pointing at his son. "He's a genius. He's won all sorts of awards for his paintings."

"Really? But even so…"

"His eye is amazing. We buy stuff up at paltry sums, and a year later that artist explodes, and we sell it for ten times the price," he said proudly.

Even when praised, the boy stayed quiet.

"Oh? So someday you might become a great artist like Picasso, Jin?" Kotoe's father asked, addressing his nephew for the first time.

"That's my dream, sir," the boy replied, without a trace of arrogance. His manner proved that he was the most together person in the room, Kotoe thought.

He knew what everyone in the room was thinking, and matched it. He was perfectly at ease, yet he never gave off even a hint of being such.

The evening developed into a drinking party, and Jin and his father spent the night at Kotoe's house.

Kotoe wanted desperately to talk with Jin, but he never left his father's side, and she never had the chance.

Only once, when Jin came to the kitchen to get a glass of water for his father's stomach pills, was she able to say, "Um…"

There she was, standing in front of him, the moment she'd been longing for.

"Oh, sorry. Can I get some water?" he asked politely.

"C-certainly!" Kotoe replied.

Her mother said, "What a good boy," and handed him a cup of water.

He bowed his head, and left.

Kotoe wanted to call after him, but she couldn't think of anything to say, and so she could only watch him leave.

But that evening, when Kotoe woke in the middle of the night and came down to the kitchen for a drink, she found Jin standing alone in the garden, looking up at the night sky.

It was winter outside, and all he had on were the pajamas they'd found for him, so it must have been terribly cold out.

He looked so sad. She'd never seen him look anything but calm, so Kotoe was a little shocked.

She wanted to know what he was thinking about, but she thought it must be something difficult that she wouldn't be able to understand. This meant she didn't know what to do. So she stood there for a while, and eventually he turned and spotted her.

"Ah…!" she exclaimed, and he bowed his head, and came over to the outside of the house.

Kotoe hurriedly unlocked the window. "Wh-what are you doing?" she asked. When she opened her mouth, a white cloud came out.

"Sorry, didn't mean to surprise you. I was just wondering if it would snow."

"Snow?"

"Yeah. It looked like it might, but…"

"You like snow?"

"Yeah. Childish of me, huh?" he grinned.

"Aren't you cold?" she asked, and instantly regretted it. What a stupid question.

But he didn't seem to notice. "Sure, it's cold. I was just about to come inside," he said softly, bobbed his head, and walked away.

Kotoe watched him go again.

At the time, they were just relatives. They had no other connection. So once again, quite some time passed without the two of them seeing each other.

(But…)

Kotoe stopped in front of the most eye-catching remnant, a spiral tower that was to have been named "The Ladder." Like Asukai Jin had done as a boy, she looked up at the sky.

But of course, it was not snowing. After all, it was April.

(But…Jin-niisan's father, so awful…)

His cause of death was still unclear.

He was walking along the street, and suddenly, he vomited up blood and fell over. It was all so sudden that the police suspected he'd been poisoned.

But there were no traces of anything like that. Witnesses had said that just before his death, he'd eaten lunch at a perfectly ordinary family restaurant. Nobody who worked at the restaurant had any connections to him. Clearly, it wasn't poison.

Even so, the whole ordeal left Asukai Jin orphaned.

"We should help him," Kotoe said.

Her mother asked, "Why don't we adopt him?"

But since her father had married into the family, he felt it would never do for him to take in his brother's child. Besides, Asukai Jin himself refused to entertain such notions, telling them not to worry.

His father's business was handed off to others, and most of the inheritance went to various debts and obligations, but Jin quickly secured a full scholarship to an art school, and a job as a cram school teacher took care of his living expenses. Very efficient.

Kotoe was somewhat relieved.

If they had adopted him, then she would have become his sister. Sure, it was a dream, but as long as they were cousins, the possibility remained.

But no matter how quickly Asukai Jin had taken charge of his situation, that sad boy who stared up at the night sky remained. Kotoe could still see it in him.

He had some sort of burden. He'd carried it for a very long time.

(And yet…)

Recently, Jin was acting strangely.

Wandering around all night long, coming back with what looked like bloodstains on his clothes…and even worse, he was oddly cheerful.

He had always been affable, easy to get along with and well liked. That hadn't changed, but…

The only person who had listened to her problems was a girl from her school named Suema Kazuko. They weren't close enough to be called friends, but she had listened carefully, and told her, "Why don't you leave things up to me?"

She had telephoned later and added, "I'll clear things up, but until then, you'd better stay away from him." Which meant Kotoe hadn't seen Jin for a while.

Suema Kazuko seemed reliable, and she would probably be able to figure things out far better than Kotoe herself could ever manage. But she still missed him.

"Jin-niisan…" she whispered, looking up at the red sky.

"Is that your man's name?" a voice asked from behind her.

Surprised, she tried to turn around, but the electric monster's hands had already latched onto each side of her head.

There was a crackle, and she could feel her brain's functions rudely interrupted.

"…………?!"

Kinukawa Kotoe was unconscious.

***

"Her name's Kinukawa Kotoe, and she's seventeen, eh?" Spooky E had gone through the pockets of his newly acquired prey, and found her Shinyo Academy Student ID.

"So, that's how she had a master key," the monster whispered, glancing over towards a sign at the side of the park. The name "Kinukawa Enterprises" was printed on it.

"Damn, she's loaded…"

Had she been awake, she would have shuddered at the sight of the sinister smile that split Spooky E's face from ear to ear. His big round eyes stayed wide open, making it even more horrible.

"Which means she's got cash. Perfect. I can use her to find this 'Imaginator.'"

The monster licked his fingers, and thrust his saliva-drenched hands into Kotoe's beautifully treated hair.

***

The next thing she knew, Kinukawa Kotoe was walking along the street at night. She was herself again.

"…………"

But she failed to wonder what she had been doing all this time. She was neither surprised nor confused.

"…………"

The street was filled with clusters of people, freed from the stress of the day. Older men, faces already flushed with booze, young lovers chattering happily in cafes.

Ignoring this peaceful world, she headed straight for an ATM, and began withdrawing money. It was early in the month, so there was no one else in line.

The machine had a limit of 300,000 yen per transaction, and she withdrew this in full ten times. Three million yen in all.

Without so much as flinching, she put the bills into her school bag.

She then headed directly to a nearby dance club.

Once before, a friend had taken her there. Kotoe herself had been unable to get swept up in the crowd's enthusiasm for the indie band's passionate, yet unskilled performance, and she had never gone back.

But now, without the slightest trace of hesitation, she headed straight down the stairs to the dimly lit basement entrance.

She paid the five thousand yen cover charge (which came with a free drink), and went in. Her ears were instantly filled with a horrific noise. Kotoe never glanced at the band, wailing away on stage, or the audience, bobbing their heads and waving their arms around. No, she headed straight for the drink counter.

"'Sup," said the spiky-haired, punk-styled guy behind the counter, listlessly. He put a paper cup in front of Kotoe.

Ignoring the drink entirely, Kotoe said, "I have a question."

"Mm?"

"You ever heard of the Imaginator?"

The punk's expression changed the moment the word left her mouth.

"Wh-what…?"

"You have?"

"No, never!"

"Liar," Kotoe declared.

The punk flinched. He leaned over and whispered in her ear, "I don't know where the hell you heard that, but you really shouldn't say that name out loud. It might—"

Before he could finish, "What? The Imaginator?" interrupted a man sitting in the corner. He was a two-meter tall skinhead. "Where'd you hear that name, high school girl? You know where that asshole is?"

The man advanced on her, the thick soles of his boots so loud they could be easily heard above the racket on stage.

"That asshole? This Imaginator is an individual?" Clearly, the man had failed to frighten Kotoe at all.

"I'm the one asking questions!" he yelled, grabbing the collar of Kotoe's uniform.

He lifted her into the air.

"Don't you piss me off! Everyone in my band's screwed up now, all because of that Imaginator freak! What the hell did he do to them?!" The veins stood out on his bare scalp.

Swinging around at the end of his arm, Kotoe shook with the waves of his anger.

But she simply asked quietly, "So, the Imaginator does something to people, and moves them over to its side? Does it use religion or something?"

The skinhead frowned at her, puzzled.

"How exactly were they changed?" she continued.

"Girl, who *are* you?" he asked, putting her down.

He'd been sure she was just some cocky kid, but there was something far stranger about her behavior.

Kotoe gave an enigmatic smile. “Just in case things aren’t perfectly clear, I’m not *asking* for any favors.” She pulled a wad of cash out of her bag. 100,000 yen. “I’m *buying* information.”

The skinhead’s eyes bugged out of his head. “Who *are* you?” he said again.

“No friend of the Imaginator,” she purred.

***

“…I’ve never seen the Imaginator directly. But I know a guy who saw something goin’ down on some back road.”

They had shifted location to the empty locker room, where the skinhead had begun talking.

“Something?”

“His words. He wasn’t really sure what. But there were several of them, and the Imaginator sent them all flyin’. Yeah, that’s what he said—not punched, not kicked, not even beat—he just sent them flyin’!

“The guys who got beat weren’t pussies or anythin’. This isn’t just some tough guy winning a street fight. This is bigger than that. After the dudes went flying, they stood up, and they started pinning down their buddies that were still standing. Their own buddies! This Imaginator turned their friends against each other!

“So no matter how badly you get messed up, you can never lay a finger on the Imaginator. Everyone that’s crossed paths with that mother ends up slammed into the pavement, pukin’ blood. I seriously don’t know what he is. Must be some kinda monster.

Like Dracula, or somethin'."

"What happened to the people he beat up? Have you talked to them?"

"They…they were…I mean…"

"Your friends were different?"

"I saw Tsuyoshi only once after. He was walking through town alone. We never really got along that well, but since everyone else had up and vanished on me, I called out to him. He turned around, looked happy to see me."

"How is that strange?"

"He's the type that always snarls, 'Shut the hell up' when you speak to him. Least if he's alone. He's usually always with some chick. But this time, he was grinning, like someone had…stripped all his thorns off. Creepy calm."

"Where had he been?"

"He said he hadn't been anywhere in particular. Insisted it was just a coincidence we hadn't bumped into each other until then. At the time, I still hadn't heard about the Imaginator, so I didn't know Tsuyoshi'd gone up against him. I only heard about that later. So at the time, I was just confused. But I haven't seen him since. He won't answer his damn phone."

"You been to their houses?"

"Nope. No idea where he lives. Never asked."

"Is that what bands are like these days?"

"Hey, I thought it was a little sad too, but everyone else seemed cool with it, so I guess I just went with the flow, you know," the skinhead protested weakly. It seemed like he was basically a nice guy deep down.

Kotoe sniggered, “So? This Imaginator…this guy heard him give his name?”

“Yeah…”

“What did he sound like?”

“Prim and stuck up, apparently. Said, ‘If you must, you may call me the Imaginator,’ whatever the hell that means.”

“He didn’t see him?”

“Nah, he was hiding. Oh, that reminds me…”

“What?”

“White. He said he saw a figure in white.”

For reasons she didn’t understand, Kotoe was badly shaken by this. “WHAT?!”

The skinhead was surprised by her sudden, strong reaction.

“Wh-what? You know someone that wears white?”

“————” But Kotoe had been programmed to suppress all unnecessary memories. So she was utterly unable to determine the cause for her surprise. She had a vague feeling that she knew a man who always dressed in white, but she couldn’t remember who.

She could hear the faint roar of the musicians and the audience, like the sound of wings in a swarm of insects. It swirled around her, made her ears hurt.

“N-no…” Kotoe said, shaking her head as if trying to clear out the confusion. “Never mind.”

“So who are you? Why are you after the Imaginator?”

“Don’t you want revenge?” Kotoe suddenly asked, out of left field.

"For those guys?" The skinhead looked dubious.

"You'd rather leave them to their fate? Fine by me…"

"Not that!" he yelled, turning red. He leapt to his feet, kicking over the folding chair he'd been sitting on.

"Then do as I say," Kotoe smirked, looking up at him.

She opened her bag, and took out the rest of the money. She dumped it on top of the table.

The skinhead gaped.

"Use this to gather all the people you can. We're going to hunt the Imaginator down."

"That's…that's a lot of money," the skinhead gulped.

"Not to me," Kotoe said, unperturbed.

"What if I take the money and run?" he asked. Like good guys always do.

"No skin off of my teeth," Kotoe said, cool as cucumber. "I'll just know you're a *coward*."

"…………!"

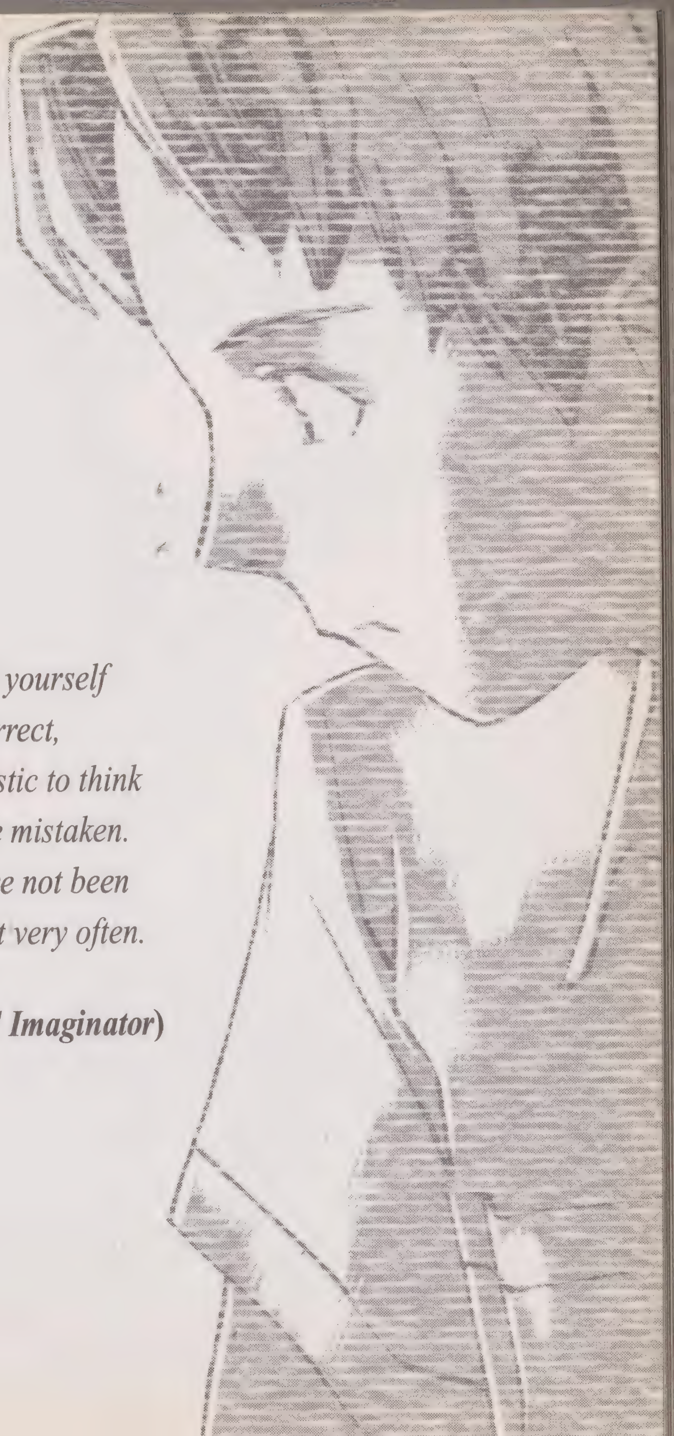
"But if you're going to swindle me, you should wait a little longer. There's more where that came from," Kotoe said, broadening her grin. No matter how big her smile became, her eyes never narrowed.

Just like Spooky E.

II

Rather than ask yourself
if you are correct,
It is far more realistic to think
about how you are mistaken.
Most humans have not been
designed to be right very often.

—Kirima Seiichi (*VS Imaginator*)



My name is Taniguchi Masaki. I became a high school student this past April, and about a month ago, I began imitating—okay, maybe it's just cosplaying as—the legendary Boogiepop.

It was the first time I'd ever fallen in love with a girl, so I got carried away and did whatever Orihata Aya told me—even if that meant dressing all in black like some sort of *shinigami* and walking around acting like a superhero. What's crazy is that I still have no idea why she wanted me to do all this.

But every time she called me, I'd come running. I made fun of myself awhile for it, but just being with Orihata was the best time I'd ever had.

Then early one Sunday, as I was tying the laces on my sneakers, getting ready to leave, my sister popped up behind me.

"Hey, Masaki…"

"What, Nagi?" I said, not turning around.

"You've been out of the house a lot lately."

"Have I?"

"And back late, too. What's going on?"

My sister always sounds a little harsh, but she's a nice person, fundamentally.

"You're out all night too, *Oneechan*," I said, smiling.

But this time she wasn't letting me get out of it that easily. "Same thing, every time?"

"Same what?"

"You don't look like you're off to meet a girl. Your clothes aren't nice enough. You used to dress better."

"………"

I was wearing a pretty shabby T-shirt, a pair of 3,000 yen jeans, and a cheap windbreaker. I'd be disguised as Boogiepop anyway, so I hadn't put a lot of thought into it.

"Where are you going?" she asked, leaning forward and peering into my eyes.

Less peering than glaring.

"N-nowhere special," I said, feeling a bead of sweat roll down my neck. This was not how my sister usually acted. She was a lot more intense today.

Nagi grabbed my hand. It was so sudden that it startled me.

"Wh-what?"

"Nice calluses," she said, stroking the back of my hand. "You practicing karate?"

"Um, y-yeah. A little. I'd been slacking off for a while, so…" I stammered.

"You're pretty strong," she said, like she was accusing me of something.

"Oh, not really…"

"Sakakibara-sensei warned you about the danger of being strong. Get cocky, and you'll get creamed."

Sakakibara-sensei was my karate *shishou*, and an old friend of Nagi's deceased father.

"Yeah, I remember. He said that so many times I still hear it in my sleep."

"But do you really understand it?" She moved her face right up against mine. My sister's a beautiful girl, and we aren't actually related, so when those red lips came towards me… But the atmosphere around us was about as unerotic as you could get. The air was chilly, and it left me shivering.

"Y-yeah," I gulped, nodding. I felt like a frog transfixed in a snake's glare.

"Then…okay," and at last, she let me go.

I fumbled as I tied my laces, and staggered out the door.

On my back, where she'd touched me, there was a wet patch of sweat, like I'd been standing next to a fire.

(They say girls are scary, but Nagi-neesan's freaking terrifying!)

I shivered again, lowered my head, and plunged into the chilly April wind.

***

When I entered the cafe where Orihata and I were supposed to meet, I saw something unexpected.

Like always, Orihata had arrived first, and she was sitting there, waiting for me. No matter how fast I tried to get there, she was always there first. This wasn't the unexpected part, though.

No, today, there was someone else sitting next to her. Not across from her, mind you. No, the shop was empty. This person was next to her, and it was another girl.

"Oh, is that your boyfriend? Ha ha! Right, he *is* handsome," the new girl said, looking at me, then grinning at Orihata. I disliked her instantly.

"Masaki, this…" Orihata stammered. She couldn't figure out what to tell me.

"Friend of yours?" I asked her, carefully avoiding eye contact with the other girl.

"From school…my *sempai*."

"Kinukawa Kotoe," she said, standing up and holding out her hand. "Nice to meet you, Taniguchi Masaki-kun."

"Yeah…" I said, reluctantly shaking her hand.

She giggled. "Boy, you sure don't hesitate to take a girl's hand, do you? Must be experienced. Will make things easier for Orihata-san someday, hunh?" She said, lewdly. It wasn't like she was making fun of me; it was more like she was trying to provoke me.

"Who are you?"

"Orihata-san's friend. Just like you."

"?"

She released my hand and slapped me on the shoulder. "Right, Boogiepop-san?"

I looked at Orihata. She gave me a tiny nod. "Kinukawa-san knows everything."

"Orihata-san told me all about it. I knew I had to help," 'Kinukawa-san' said brightly.

This wasn't exactly working for me. "What do you want?"

"You don't need a reason to do the right thing," she said reasonably, but the phrase, in this case, was just screwy.

"………" I silently picked up the check. "Uh, Orihata, come with me for a minute."

"Oh, I don't mean to get in your way," Kinukawa laughed.

Sullenly, I said, "I'll pay for this, so take your time."

Then I took Orihata's hand and pulled her out of the seat.

We left the shop, and Kinukawa waved at us through the window. I walked quickly away, and hid beneath the bridge.

"Um, Masaki…" Orihata tried to say.

I interrupted her. "What did she do to you?"

"Nothing…"

"Who the hell does she think she is? Did she threaten you?"

"Nothing like that, really," Orihata said, looking distressed.

I backed down. "Then what? She doesn't look like a friend at all."

"………"

"If you're in some sort of trouble, I could…" I began, hands clenching into fists.

"No!" Orihata cried, turning pale, and grabbing my hand.

I took a deep breath. My sister's voice floated through my head, "Get cocky, and you'll get creamed."

"O-okay then…sorry. But at least tell me why that girl knows about Boogiepop," I asked, staring at her.

She avoided my gaze, staring at the ground. She looked like she was searching for a lie, which pissed me off.

***

"…She saw the clothes," Aya managed, obviously lying.

"Where? At school?" Masaki asked. The edge in his tone made it clear he didn't believe her.

"In my apartment. She's my landlord's daughter."

This was true, but she couldn't tell him that her personality had been changed by Spooky E.

"What?" Masaki asked, surprised. This rang a bell. He growled, "There *was* a sign saying Kinukawa Enterprises…" He had been to Aya's apartment building several times, and seen the sign next to the door. "So what does she want?"

"Well…"

***

The truth was:

Yesterday, she had received orders from Spooky E, saying that a girl named Kinukawa Kotoe would be coming over, and Aya should do whatever she said. Kotoe had shown up at Aya's apartment shortly after.

The moment she laid eyes on her, Aya knew Spooky E had spent quite a lot of time working on her. Her expression was exactly like Spooky E's, but was less his arms and legs, and more like an independently functioning copy.

"It's a good thing you live in Kinukawa Kotoe's territory," what should have been Kotoe herself said, laughing. "We're gonna use this as a base while we hunt down the Imaginator."

"The Imaginator…?"

"You don't need to know. But there will be a few men coming by, so let them in, do whatever they ask you to."

Aya stiffened at this. She was sure "whatever" covered a lot more than cooking.

"B-but then Masaki will…"

"Like I said, you're almost finished with that boy. Time to cut him loose. Or are you still going on about how you don't want him to hate you?"

"Th-the Towa Organization t-told me not to be h-hated by anyone, so…"

"The Towa Organization? You still think you're working for them?"

Kotoe shoved Aya hard. She fell over backwards.

Kotoe then kicked her in the cheek. Aya couldn't dodge at all, and cut the inside of her mouth, blood spilling out from between her lips. Kotoe continued to hurt Aya, and Aya never resisted.

Had Kotoe had any free will left, she would have undoubtedly shrieked, "Stop!" in Aya's place. But no one there was capable of stopping the violence.

"The Towa Organization forgot about you years ago! You are nothing but a tool for me—for Spooky E, to use how *I* see fit!"

"Yes…"

"And where the hell do you get off, getting all picky about men *now*?! Can you even count how many men you've taken since you left the institution?"

"No…"

"All on the pretext of some experiment to see if normal and synthetic humans could crossbreed—but you never managed to get knocked up, did you? Which means you're just a useless whore!"

"Yes…"

"All the successes I've had and I get no luck at all! Why should a failure like you get to have all the fun? You piece of shit! You little bitch!"

Rage that had nothing to do with Kotoe's body, but everything to do with the knowledge and personality overwriting hers, came pouring out.

But all the expressionless Aya did was answer mechanically, "Yes…"

The beating continued a little while longer, but at last Kotoe grew out of breath, and she stopped.

"Hmph! Get up and make me some food. Kinukawa Kotoe's body has moved too much and is demanding nutrition."

"Yes…"

Swaying, Aya got to her feet.

She took her own convenience store *bento* and put it in the almost unused built-in microwave. Standing there, waiting for it to warm up, Aya's eyes were vacant. But her lips were faintly trembling. Not from fear, but rather because she was whispering something under her breath. So quietly that no one else could hear, so quietly the sound did not even reach her own ears, over and over:

"I must save Masaki, I must save Masaki…"

***

…And then this morning, Spooky E had ordered Aya to bang Taniguchi Masaki. It was her last chance to test if crossbreeding with him was even possible. The cruelest joke he could make, though, was to send his copy, Kinukawa Kotoe, along to watch. It was like pouring salt directly into her wounds.

But she couldn't tell Masaki any of this.

"I…"

"You can't tell me?" Masaki said, sadly.

"It…it's all my fault," she managed.

"Okay," Masaki nodded, like he had made up his mind about something.

Aya hoped that this had made Masaki hate her. After all, Spooky E had said her orders (to not be hated and to not make trouble) were no longer active. There was no one to criticize her for being hated. If hating her saved him, then she wanted him to hate her.

Her own feelings were another problem.

"In that case, we should stop playing Boogiepop," Masaki said, curtly.

"Yes," Aya said, still staring at the ground. This was for the best, she thought.

But his next words shocked her…

"So, I'll take that," he said, and took the Nike bag out of Aya's hands.

"Hunh?" Aya's eyes widened. The Boogiepop costume and makeup were in the bag.

"I'm going to keep doing this without you," Masaki said.

***

Ultimately, I was just angry.

Kinukawa's attitude had pissed me off, and I was annoyed that Orihata couldn't tell me about it. But more than anything, I was furious with myself for happily dressing up as Boogiepop without once trying to figure out why Orihata wanted me to.

"M-Masaki?" Orihata asked, surprised. "What do you mean?"

"Like I said…I'm going on alone. I don't need your help anymore," I snapped.

I had assumed I was playing Boogiepop because Orihata wanted me to.

But judging from that Kinukawa woman's attitude, Orihata had not been doing that of her own free will.

I'd been useless. By trying to make her happy, I'd simply driven her into a corner.

"But why?! You don't have to do anything anymore, Masaki!!"

"No, *you* don't!" I shouted, angry. "Why didn't you ever tell me you really didn't want me to be Boogiepop? If you'd just *said* something, you never would've had to have been bait!"

"I…" Orihata stammered.

"I didn't *want* to put you in danger like that! But I thought it was what you wanted, so…!" I trailed off, losing track of what I wanted to say.

Both of us stood there in the darkness, glaring at each other stupidly, shaking.

Finally, "Why…why are you…I just…" Orihata whispered, sounding exhausted.

For no real reason, this made me angry again.

"Goodbye!" I roared, turning my back on her, and walking away. I couldn't bear to be in this conversation another second.

All she'd done was use me, and for something she hadn't even wanted. That's how I understood the situation. So what did that make me?

All I'd done was to think cheerily that being with her was all I needed.

"Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit!"

I swung the bag filled with Boogiepop stuff around me as I ran, tears streaming down my cheeks. I was incredibly ashamed. Dressing up as Boogiepop was far less embarrassing than this.

Right then, I screamed inside.

'I'll be a superhero as long as I damn well feel like it!'

***

"Masaki!" Aya shrieked, and tried to chase after him.

But someone grabbed her shoulder roughly from behind.

"Wait, Camille," he said. It was Spooky E. He had been secretly watching the entire time.

"L-let go of me!" She tried to fling him off. But Spooky E was inhumanly strong, and Aya's body might as well have been in a vise for all the freedom of movement he'd left her.

"Change of orders. Forget about him," Spooky E sneered.

"Eh?"

"Looks like he's going to keep doing Boogiepop on his own. Saves us the bother."

"What do you mean?"

"Sooner or later, they're gonna find Boogiepop's corpse lying in an alley somewhere. Then everyone'll know the truth behind the legends. It was just some heartbroken idiot!" Spooky

E guffawed.

Aya's face turned white. "W-was…!"

Was that what 'cut him loose' meant?

Kill Masaki as the 'real' one publicly, and make the real one 'fake.' Was that Spooky E's plan?

If that drew the real Boogiepop out of hiding, then great. If not, well, at least Spooky E would have cheered himself up.

He planned to kill Masaki!

"Y-you can't!" Aya cried, grabbing Spooky E. The shoulder he was holding felt like it was going to pop.

A second later, electricity ran from Spooky E's hands, coursing through Aya's body. It rattled her bones, her spinal cord, her brain. Every nerve in her body shook, and her skin quivered.

"Aaaauuuugh!"

Her head flung back, the walls of her nostrils tore open, and blood shot out.

(M-Masaki…!)

Even now, her immobile body was struggling to escape Spooky E's shocking grasp.

Electricity raced through her again.

"———!" She fell unconscious.

"Bwa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!" Spooky E laughed on and on, echoing through the deserted space below the bridge.

***

But what was Boogiepop?

"Hah…hah…hah…" I ran till I was gasping for breath, then collapsed on the sidewalk, and started thinking.

Orihata had no family, apparently. There had to be some sort of reason why she could live in such a nice apartment building.

And if that reason had some connection to the crazy legends of a black cloaked *shinigami* boy…

(…Then what?)

How the hell did that have anything to do with that ludicrous outfit?

Certainly not money. She'd thrown away drugs worth millions without so much as a second thought. If it was that type of syndicate, then they'd hardly do something so wasteful. But her actions themselves did seem productive as far as cleaning up the city.

"You're a hero, Masaki," Aya had said to me once, and these words suddenly echoed through my head again.

(Damn it!)

Tears welled up once more. She'd been acting, but I couldn't stop the burning feeling in my chest.

But this was no time for crying.

I had to calm down, and decide what to do.

I looked around myself, and made sure no one else was there, then sat cross-legged on the pavement. I closed my eyes, and began meditating.

My *shishou* once said, "When you are in trouble, at least maintain the appearance of control. Pretend to be calm. This may actually trick you into cooling down."

For a karate instructor, he never once said anything about spirit or mental focus. He'd get angry every time he saw me frowning. All in all, I must say, it was a rather strange way of learning.

"Imagine a staff in your heart. Decide your direction by letting it topple over. The less logic you force into your imagination, the better the results."

…But the staff in my heart just spun round and round, and never even started to fall.

"At times like this, the way you are tackling the problem is mistaken. You are trying to decide something that cannot be decided. The first thing you need to do is look for that which you can."

…I was starting to feel like *Shishou* was whispering in my ear.

(*Okaaay…*)

Did I hate Orihata?

…No, I didn't.

Did I dislike being Boogiepop?

…Not true either.

Was I trying to poke my nose in something way over my head?

…Yeah, probably.

Was this because I wanted to be Boogiepop, so I could beat up people?

…No, not really. Not that at all.

Then what?

…I don't know. But I can't just do nothing. I think I have to do something.

What was it I had to be careful of?

…Don't get carried away. *Shishou* always said that. And…

"—Nagi-neesan."

I opened my eyes.

"Then I can't go home."

I couldn't get her mixed up in this. That had been bugging me.

(She'll be pissed…)

I stood up, dusted myself off, and managed a feeble grin.

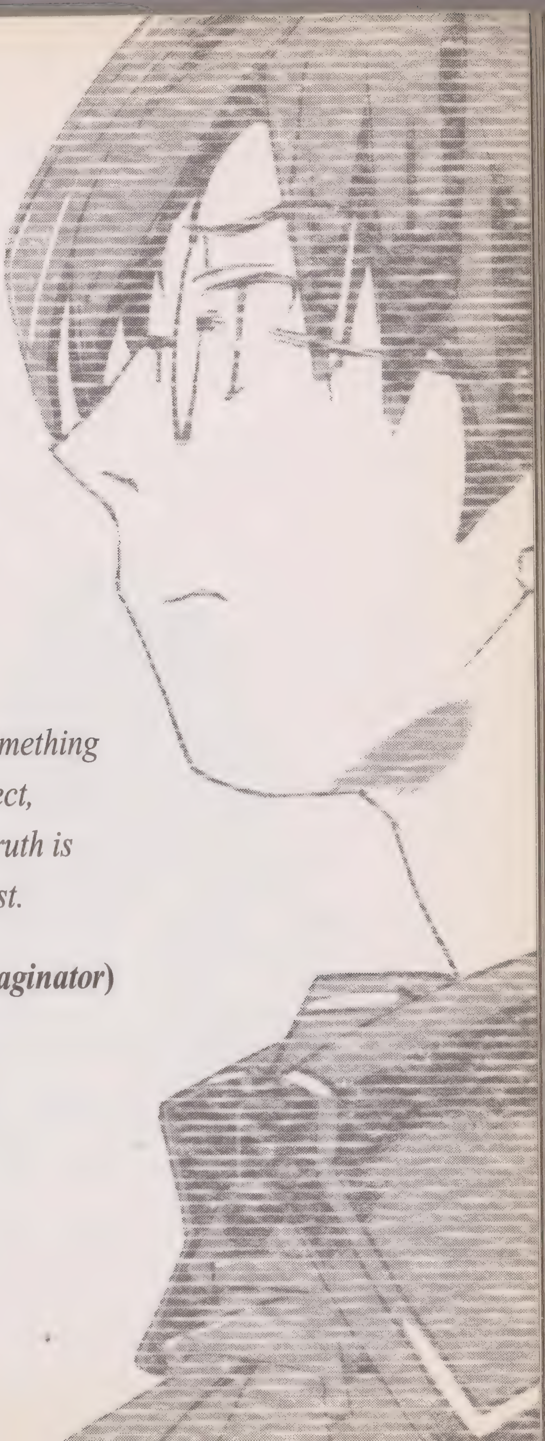
Here I was, just starting high school, and already I was gonna be skipping.

If I'd known I was gonna end up like this, I wouldn't have been so careful in junior high…

"Ha ha! I sure was an *idiot*!"

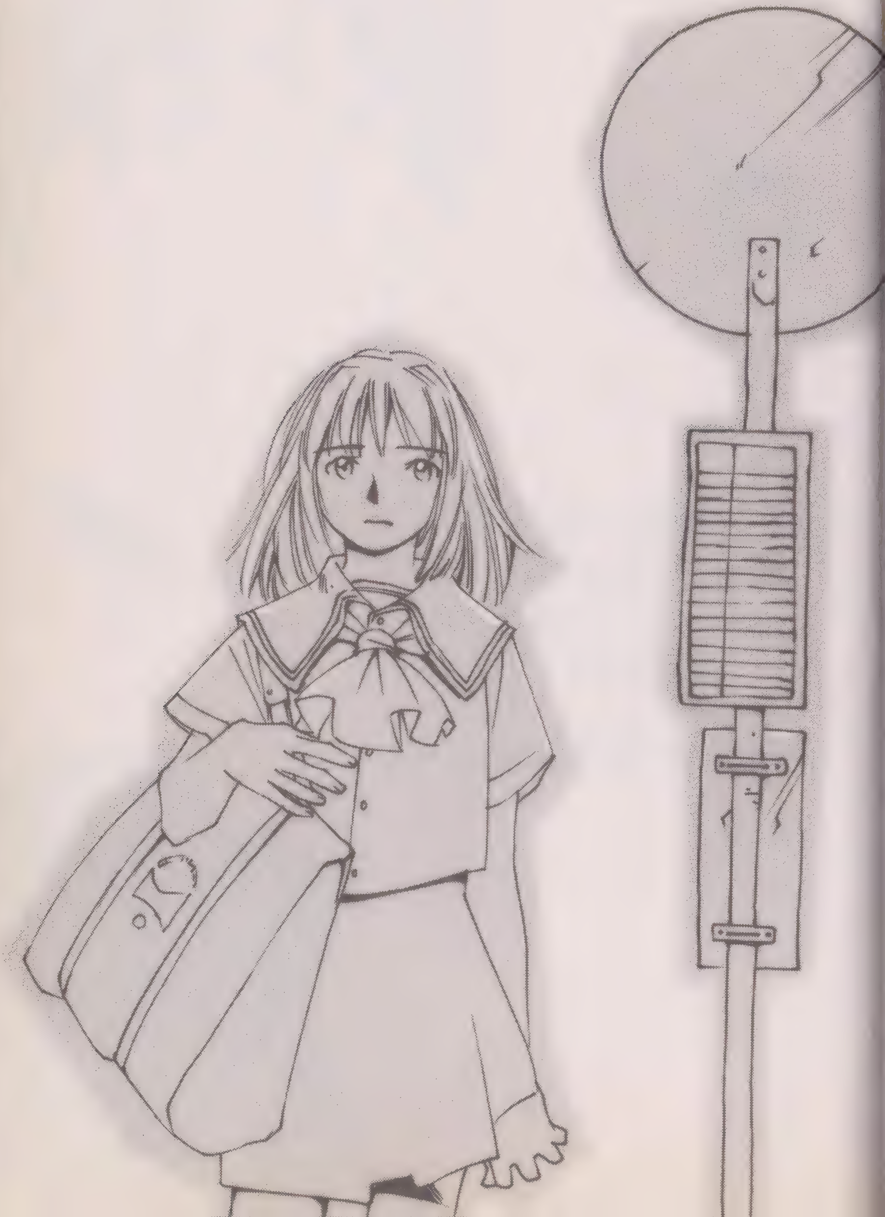
Hoisting the Boogiepop bag over my back, I headed off down the street.

III



When humans think something
is absolutely correct,
In most cases, that truth is
already in the past.

—Kirima Seiichi (*VS Imaginator*)



"What is it, Suema?"

We were waiting in line at the bus stop in front of our school when I suddenly stepped out of line, much to the surprise of my friend Miyashita Touka, who was standing behind me.

I didn't answer. I just kept walking forward, abandoning my place in line.

"Wait, Kazuko!" Touka yelled, grabbing my sleeve.

"Just remembered something, Touka. I'm skipping cram school today," I said, not even turning around to look.

"Hunh? Why?"

"Just let me borrow your notes later, okay?!" I said airlessly, and quickly ran away.

If I didn't hurry, I'd lose sight of her.

Walking down the hill that our school is on was unmistakably one of the girls I'd seen with Asukai Jin.

Her name, I'm sure, was "Kitahara Misaki." She went to our school?

No, I'm sure the last time I saw her, she was wearing a different uniform. Which means…

(She's in disguise? Sneaking in?)

Why on earth would she do something like that?

Plus, to get into our school, she would need a card. If she had managed to get one, then this would be pretty hardcore.

"Misaki" was moving down the hill at a good clip. I managed to keep her in sight, but at this speed, I stuck out like a sore thumb.

And I was wearing leather shoes, while she had on sneakers. I was obviously less natural than her.

After a few minutes of this, Misaki turned off the road into a park. It was a collecting ground for water in the event of a flood, and there was nowhere to hide. It was right below the school, and in full view of the staff room, so students hardly ever went near the place.

(Uh-oh.)

There was nothing I *could* do but keep on walking.

But a short distance away, I bent over, doing a bad impression of someone whose shoelaces have come undone.

I glanced sideways into the park, and Misaki was talking on her cell phone.

"…No, she's not here. She's been absent for the last few days…"

A gust of wind carried her words to my ears, but quickly dissipated a moment later, leaving me unable to hear anything.

('She'…?)

She was looking for someone?

A second later, Misaki ended the call.

She headed towards me, so I hurriedly stood up, and began walking before she caught up with me.

I gave up walking quickly. In a few minutes, Misaki had caught up with me, and passed me. Clearly, I couldn't chase her any further than this. She'd seen me.

I was sure she was headed for the cram school and Asukai Jin.

I just went back to school.

Touka was still standing there at the bus stop.

"Um?" I said, eyes widening. Yeah, the bus had already left, and Touka hadn't gotten on.

"Thought you'd be back, Suema," she grinned.

"Why?"

"'Cause you forgot your bag. You didn't notice?" she said in astonishment. I gaped. Now that she mentioned it, my hands were kind of empty.

"Ah…!" How stupid of me. I was so preoccupied with chasing after Misaki that I didn't even remember that my bag was lying on the ground.

"Here you go," Touka said, handing it over. My face was bright red.

"Th-thanks. Sorry. So, uh, you waited for me?"

"Yep. I thought you'd be back," Touka nodded.

She was such a nice girl, I thought. So I said it aloud, "You're really nice, you know that?"

Touka snorted, "What?"

"No, really."

"Oh, please," she said, playfully tackling me.. As her fist bounced off my head, I frowned.

Touka's bag caught my eye.

It wasn't the school bag that she normally carried, but rather a huge Spalding sports bag.

I wondered what was in it, but…

"So, what now? Still skipping cram school?" she asked.

"Eh? Uh…ahhhh…nah, let's go."

To be honest, I wanted to see if Asukai Jin was there or not.

Touka and I lined up at the bus stop, which was empty, since a bus had only just been by.

I changed my grip on the bag Touka had been holding for me.

(But I don't remember putting it down…)

True, it wasn't in my hands. When I started off after Misaki, Touka grabbed my sleeve, and I didn't have it then…

(Hunh…)

There was a hole in my memory. I felt like someone had picked my pocket.

"So why'd you run off like that? You looked pretty serious…" Touka asked.

"Eh?" I pulled out of my thoughts and turned to look at her.

She was grinning. It was one of those blameless sort of smiles.

"Um, I thought I saw someone I knew from Junior High…but I was wrong," I lied.

"Really?"

"Y-yes! Some boy I knew."

"Your first *love*…?"

"Uh, maybe."

"Oooh? I demand details," she insisted, grinning.

"Maybe sometime later. Not right now."

I couldn't let Touka get mixed up with Asukai Jin and the unfathomable strangeness clustering around him. She was a good friend. I couldn't put her in harm's way.

"Oh, all right," Touka nodded, resigned.

Then she gave me a hard-to-describe, asymmetrical expression.

"If you're up against something you can't handle, you should consult your friends. That's what they're here for," she said, as if performing a speech on stage.

I felt like someone had wrapped their fist around my heart. It was like my nuclear core had been pierced.

"I-it's nothing like that!" I hastily protested.

"Sure," she said, shoulders slumping, and then her face went back to normal.

"…………"

I found it rather hard to calm down. For some reason, I thought Touka had wanted to warn me about something. I had no real reason to think that, but I just couldn't shake that impression.

We got on the bus, got off at the station, and just before we entered the school, I said, "Uh, there's a study guide I need to get. I'll catch up with you, okay?"

"Want me to come?"

"Nah, you go on in."

"I'll save a seat for you."

"Thanks!"

We split up. I waited for about thirty seconds after Touka went inside, then I snuck into the building after her.

I avoided the elevators, and went up the stairs instead.

Asukai Jin was not in the guidance office.

(His day off?)

I tried to remember if Asukai Jin had been off this day last week, but I couldn't be sure.

"Hmmm…" I hesitated for a moment, but then I went back down the stairs and used the pay phone in the lobby to dial the phone number to Kinukawa Kotoe's house.

I didn't really want to cause any more worry for a single-minded girl like Kotoe, but she lived next door to him, so she ought to know if Asukai Jin was there or not.

It rang several times, but at last someone answered. "Kinukawa residence."

Sounded like an older woman, probably her mom.

"Um, my name's Suema…is Kotoe-san there?" I asked. Halfway through the sentence, I heard a gasp on the other end of the line.

"She's not here," she snapped, her tone suddenly becoming very harsh.

I was a little taken aback, but asked, "Do you know where she is?"

"……………" There was no answer.

"Hello?"

"What do you want with her?" she suddenly shrieked.

"Uh…"

"What were you going to do with her? Where are you now?" she screamed.

"Whoa! H-hang on! What are you talking about?" I asked, flustered. She asked where I was again, so I said, "The cram school by the station."

"The cram school?" she asked, mystified.

"Yes," I said, nodding into the phone.

"You are…Kotoe's…what?"

"Um, we both go to Shinyo Academy. Different classes, but…we're friends. My name's Suema Kazuko."

"You're at the cram school?"

"Y-yes, I'm an exam student."

"Kotoe hasn't been to school. You didn't know?" her mother said, surprising me.

"Eh…?" I said, stunned. "R-really?!"

"Her *sensei* called…she hasn't been to school in three days!"

"H-has she been home?"

"We had a fight and she ran away," her mother said, sounding like she was about to cry. "She's always been such a good girl. She would never have stayed out all night, or taken money out of the bank without permission…"

"…………!" I was floored.

That girl?

The girl who'd cried and begged me to 'save Jin-niisan?'

"I-I don't believe it…"

"Do you have any idea where Kotoe might be?"

"H-how long has she been gone?

"Four days…"

"O-okay! I'll go look for her!"

I hung up, badly shaken.

I forgot to take my telephone card out, and the warning buzzer echoed through the lobby for a few minutes. At last, I realized it was for me, and reclaimed it.

(Wh-what's going on…?)

Had Asukai Jin done something to her?

(No…if he wanted to, he would have done something a long time ago. She's been right next to him all this time.)

Been thinking about him for so long…

Staying out all night and withdrawing money?

"…………"

Trying to calm my spinning head, I ground my teeth.

(What now? Obviously, I've got to find Kotoe. If I don't talk to her, I can't begin to figure this out…)

I picked up the receiver again, and called everyone I knew who might know Kotoe, anyone who was in her class this year.

"Eh? Kinukawa? Dunno…she's got a pretty bad rep lately, been throwing around how rich she is and all…"

"That girl asked me if I wanted to go out partying with her. Who is she *kidding*? We have *exams*! Even said she'd pick up the tab, so I won't say I wasn't tempted! Ha ha ha!!!"

"Sorry, Suema. Should never have introduced her to you. I was a little worried about it, so I asked how things were going, and she just looked at me blankly. Last time, she was almost crying! Something's strange about her. You heard anything?"

"Yeah, I saw her leave school with a bunch of lower classmen. No, all boys. Most of them scary looking, rough types. Why? Dunno, after her money, I guess…"

"Don't even talk to me about *her*. She used to be okay, but now she's just another rich bitch. Oh, get this: I asked her what she was doing for college, and she said, 'Who gives a shit?' Bet you anything she has some back road in."

I gave everyone non-committal replies, but inside I was just flabbergasted.

The opinions varied, but the general consensus was the same.

Kinukawa Kotoe had changed…and with unbelievable speed.

Completely confused now, I flopped down on a leather bench in the lobby.

What the hell had happened to her? What was going on?

If what everyone said was true, then she had probably already forgotten that she ever asked me to help, forgotten she was worried about Asukai Jin. She must have. Kyoko said she had, and Kyoko's the one who sent her to me in the first place.

Even speaking generously, I'm not that great of a person. Something I was passionate about one day, I'll more than likely have grown tired of the next. I was always thirsty for something new.

Maybe Kotoe had just fallen prey to what adults always describe as, “Kids these days.”

But…

“I knew I could count on you. You seem so with it.”

The way her eyes sparkled when she said that…I couldn’t believe the girl who said that could be this shallow. This wasn’t anything to do with belief—it simply didn’t parse. I couldn’t even begin to figure it out.

“…………”

I balled up both fists in front of my lips, stared at nothing, and thought as hard as I could.

But my thoughts cut off suddenly.

I had seen someone come in the automatic doors at the building’s entrance. Someone wearing white clothes.

Asukai Jin.

“…………!”

Reflexively, I stood up.

Asukai Jin noticed that there was a high school girl, me, glaring at him.

He smiled at me. “Hey. You a student here?”

“…………”

“Something wrong? You look pale,” He said as he started walking towards me.

“Asukai Jin?” I said, before I knew it.

“Yes?”

"I need to talk to you. Do you have time?" Like I was not myself. My voice was so quiet, so calm.

"Oh, sure. Counseling…?"

"No."

I took a step towards him.

"As Kinukawa Kotoe's friend."

***

One hour earlier—

Asukai Jin was sitting alone in a cafe near his university, drinking coffee and flipping through the pages of a paperback.

The place was pretty crowded. Most of the customers were groups of two or three, and the place rang with girls' voices raised in laughter or exclamation. Asukai was the only person sitting in a booth alone.

The cell phone in his breast pocket rang.

"Yes?" he said, answering it at once.

"It's Misaki," a girl's voice said.

"How was it?"

"Just like you said, 'she' wasn't here."

"Really?"

"Yes. She hasn't been to school for a few days."

"Did she call in sick? Is she at the hospital?"

"I don't know. Nobody seems to know what's happened to her, including her teachers."

"And this is not because she's a new student or hasn't got to know anyone yet?”

“No. Everyone knew her, but she didn’t talk about herself much. They described her as mysterious and more than a little remote.”

“Hmm…”

“It seems like she didn’t have any friends. I asked several people, but none of them could think of any.”

“Okay, thank you.”

“What should I do next?”

“Can you change on the way? Just throw that uniform away, and meet me at the cram school.”

“Okay.”

Asukai hung up.

He looked up, and found the waitress had come to refill his cup.

“Refill?”

“Yes, please.”

The waitress bent over to fill his cup, and put her lips near his ear. “New orders came.”

“……” Asukai Jin nodded faintly.

“A girl will arrive soon in his ‘stead.’ I’m to do as she says.”

“A girl?” Asukai bobbed his head, and took a sip of his coffee.

He knew the waitress well. She’d been a student of his at the cram school the year before. Starting this spring, she’d become a college student, but she had been working at this cafe since she was a *ronin.*

“There’s no medicine in this one, right?” Asukai whispered, smiling.

The waitress grinned back. “You never know. There’s always a chance I might slip you something…”

“Scary,” he said, ducking slightly. She went away.

He silently drank his coffee for a few minutes, then looked back at the book in his hands.

The book’s title was *The Victor’s Principle: The Victim’s Future*, by Kirima Seiichi. It was a thin book, only about 150 pages.

He flipped through the pages one way, then back the other. He read nothing, but kept opening it to one passage, then closing it again.

It read:

“…but all hopes, ultimately, are achieved in the future. Everyone dreams, desires the realization of those dreams, but it is not the dreamer that obtains that realization. It is the following generation. Furthermore, for those that receive the fruits of that success, it is no longer a dream, but established fact. All hopes must therefore become the sacrifice of the victor, but this is how humanity has advanced. Our only road is ahead of us, for people cannot live in the past…”

The grammar was so twisted, it was impossible to tell if the writer was resigned or optimistic.

“…………”

Without reading it, without even displaying interest in it, Asukai flipped back and forth, always returning to that passage.

"Sacrifice, hunh?" he muttered at last, so quietly no one could hear him. "That may be the only way…"

His phone rang again.

"Asukai speaking," he answered at once. Nodding to himself, he listened to the other speaker, but suddenly his eyes narrowed. "What?! Really?" His voice was tense. "And? You don't know where 'she' is at all? ——Okay. No, don't worry about it. I'd get away from there if I were you. She probably won't come back," he said quietly, calmly. But the worry was clear on his face.

At last, he hung up, and for a moment, did not move. The hand holding the book clenched, crushing it.

"Jesus…so that's the 'girl.'"

He stood up.

The waitress from before was at the register, and took his check. Asukai whispered in her ear, "When the 'girl' comes in his stead, tell me at once. If you can, take her captive."

"Okay. How?"

"Up to you. But try to do it so you don't leave any evidence."

"Got it."

"Thank you. I'll be at the cram school."

He left the cafe, and headed straight for work.

(What now…?)

As he walked, his expression was peaceful. But it was the kind of tense quiet that could snap at any second.

(If I'm going to help her, I'll have to hurry…but…)

From time to time, his teeth ground together.

He reached the school, and entered the building. A girl sitting in the lobby stood up, and glared at him.

For some reason, Asukai was badly shaken.

She was clearly an ordinary girl, but he felt like she had some unfathomable power.

Like a warrior headed for the battle of her life, sword drawn. She stared right through Asukai.

***

The girl introduced herself as Suema Kazuko. A friend of Kinukawa Kotoe's.

"…Kinukawa-san has not been herself recently. Have you heard anything?" she asked, the moment they entered the tiny counseling room.

"Yes…I mean, I just found out a few minutes ago."

"What do you think?"

"What…what do you mean?"

"Kinukawa-san is in love with you," Suema announced.

"…………"

"Yeah, I know. She's the one who ought to tell you. But I figured you already knew. Right?"

"Yes, vaguely…"

"I've no intention of asking you what you think of her. That's none of my business. But do you think her transformation has anything to do with you?"

"…I don't know."

"Kinukawa-san thinks nothing of you, now?"

"So it seems."

"I think you know."

"What?"

"The reason."

"Why do you think that?"

"It's written all over your face."

Asukai froze. Was this girl like him? Could she see *something in people's hearts*?

But after a moment, she sighed.

"But seriously…it's not that simple. I just got the feeling you did."

"I'd honestly like to know the reason. But…" This was true. Why did she have to be a target? He didn't know. There should have been no chance for *him* to get near her.

(If he was after money, there must have been better candidates.)

"Kinukawa-san was worried about you," Suema said.

Asukai was slightly taken aback. "Worried? Why?"

"I can't tell you. I promised her."

"………"

"But now that I've actually met you, I think I understand how Kinukawa-san feels," Suema said, staring at Asukai. "She has changed, but I suspect you have as well."

"Possibly… I guess I'm not going to be able to return her feelings," Asukai said, looking down.

Suema shook her head. "Not that. I don't think you would have been collected enough to be concerned about her. That's part of the reason why she liked you. She wanted to help you."

"…………"

"You were caught up with your own mess."

"…………"

"She liked it that way," Suema continued. "She knew that's the kind of person you were—until you changed. You found something. That gave you time to poke your head up above the surface. And when she realized that…"

Asukai was beginning to shudder. He thought this girl was far more collected than he was.

How much did she know?

Or was she also working for *him*?

"Are you…" he started, but then he saw something.

Suema's hands were locked together on her lap, but the fingers were trembling.

She was afraid, but was forcing herself to be brave.

"What are you doing, Asukai-sensei?" she asked.

"Why do you want to know?" Asukai replied, trying to wrestle control.

"Because…"

"You said you were friends, but you clearly haven't known her that long. You have nothing in common. In fact, I imagine you would find her rather irritating," he said, recovering his cool. She was just a girl. Not worth being afraid of.

He'd been looking at it for a while, but this girl had no 'flower.' She was the same type as Kotoe. This type never liked each other.

Suema failed to answer.

Asukai pressed forward. "You're a pretty smart girl. Are you proud of that?"

***

"N-no!" I said, feeling like someone had stuck a knife in my chest.

"I can't believe you would have any respect for a girl like Kotoe-chan. Especially after you found out how much she's changed. You just can't figure things out, right?"

"I…I just…"

"You want an answer."

"Th-that's probably part of it, but…" The entire conversation had been me on a roll, but the moment I started to lose my footing, I stumbled. Asukai Jin's eyes looked like they could see right into my soul.

"Oh, I understand. I'm not criticizing you for it. But I'm more worried about Kotoe-chan than you are. I'm just grateful it was worthy of your attention."

I had no idea how to respond to that.

"A-asukai-sensei…?"

"What?"

"Do you really…are you sure you don't have anything to do with her transformation?" Even as I spoke, I realized this wasn't the question I wanted to ask.

"I feel a little guilty. I'm sure it's my fault somehow," he said, sounding pretty sincere. Like he was really a good guy.

But that's what bugged me.

It was unnatural. And no matter how you looked at it…he was hiding something.

"Then does it have something to do with that painting?" I babbled. Even I wasn't sure what I meant.

"What?" Asukai Jin asked, puzzled. "Which painting?"

"'Snow Falls in April.' That picture is your…how can I put this…" Basically, I just felt like I had to say something. If I stayed silent, and let him keep talking, I'd completely lose control of the conversation and not able to argue anything at all. "It's a part of you that Kinukawa-san could never touch. Don't you see?"

"…………"

"A-and she felt like there was something about you she couldn't handle."

"…………" Asukai was expressionless. He didn't react at all.

What was I trying to say?

Was I being the archetypal excitedly stupid high school girl, who speaks without thinking?

But I felt like I was right. That picture said something about this man…

"That picture," Asukai Jin said.

I snapped out of it. "Wh-what?"

"Do you understand it?" he asked, his voice so quiet and calm. And a little bit like he was making fun of me.

But I snapped, "I don't know everything, but that picture… yeah. I do." If he was going to make fun of me, I might as well speak my mind.

"Pray tell," he said. I got the feeling he was pulling a little away, flinching back.

"I hate it," I snarled, going for the big blow in the hopes of knocking him over.

But he just airily said, "Harsh."

I was off balance now, but I couldn't pull back. "I'm right, aren't I? Did you actually want to draw a picture like that?"

"I wasn't exactly planning on selling it."

"But you were trying to capture something external. Right?"

"———"

"It's an awfully lonely picture."

"You're the first person who's said that about it."

"But that's what I think. No matter how you look at that picture, there's no trace of the painter's intentions." When did I suddenly become a hypocritical art critic? I was so unconvincing.

"…I see," Asukai Jin nodded anyway.

"What were you thinking when you drew that thing?" I asked, growing uncertain as to why I was sitting here, having this conversation.

"Why are we talking about this?" Asukai Jin asked, clearly thinking the same thing.

I managed to find some words and turn them into an answer. "Because we want to help Kinukawa-san. That's why I want to know more about you."

"What is it that makes you work so hard for Kotoe-chan?" Asukai Jin had been staring at me this whole time. Unable to hold his gaze any longer, I broke eye contact.

"You…already said that."

"Mm? What do you mean?"

"That I'm not really that close to her. But if I ever want to be closer to her, then I have to help her now." No sooner had the words left my mouth that I felt a pain in my chest. I had a strong sensation that I was a horribly pathetic life form.

The thought that I needed a reason to simply get closer to another human being just seemed like the saddest thing in the world.

I found myself staring at the floor and shaking.

This had to stop.

I couldn't deal with Asukai Jin. There was no way I could ever understand the secret Kotoe had wanted to know.

Suddenly, Asukai Jin asked, "Do you want to be saved?"

"Hunh—?"

"Do you want to know what I am doing?" He stared directly at me, missing nothing.

I was transfixed. I couldn't move.

"I am trying to change the world," he said, his eyes completely serious.

"…………"

"I am trying to heal the flaws in human hearts. And I'm doing it the only way I know how…by planting the right type of flower in their souls."

"..........."

I remembered something I had thoughtlessly said back when Kotoe was telling me about Asukai Jin. "He goes out every night and comes back covered in other people's blood? That sounds like, I dunno…like a vampire or something."

And now, I found myself nailed to the wall, trapped in his gaze and totally immobile.

"It's a problem of balance. I've been searching for that. I've got all kinds of people 'cooperating.' And finally I found it. That balance; a gentle, modest 'seed' that can be planted harmlessly in almost everyone."

"..........."

"It has no shape, and it won't ever help you achieve your desires…but that's what allows it to meet all of the requirements. The perfect 'seed.'"

"..........."

"Fortunately, I had already found that balance. I met a 'girl' who had it. Now all I have to do is find her."

"..........."

"I will take this seed from the 'girl' and propagate it across the world…the 'seed' will lay down roots, and before they know it, everyone in the world will be without flaws. To achieve this, I have to sacrifice the girl, but that is a necessary evil."

"..........."

"Your heart is flawed as well. You realize that, don't you?"

"..........."

"What if I told you I could fix that…?"

"…………"

"What would you say?"

"I…I would…" I could hear my own heart beating furiously. Beating so hard it felt like it was about to leap out of my mouth. "I have already *been* saved by someone else!" I shouted.

Asukai Jin frowned. "Oh? Who?"

"B-boogiepop!" I said, well aware that I was babbling like a lunatic. The person who had actually saved me had said that name. But did *shinigami* actually save people?

"Oh, *him* again?" Asukai chuckled. It sounded like he'd heard the rumors.

I could feel my face turning red. "Not like that!"

"He's a superhero, right?"

"H-he's not that simple…" I tried to argue, but in truth I knew nothing about him. "A-and before you make fun of him…I mean, you just said y-you were going to change the world…" as the words left my mouth, I realized something.

(What——?!)

What had he just said?

The true impact of his words sank in.

Asukai Jin stared at me silently.

"…………"

I gulped.

He slowly reached his hand out towards my chest.

I felt like I was frozen to my chair—I couldn't get away.

Asukai Jin's fingers began to turn, like he was grasping something I couldn't see.

(Wh-what is he……?!)

What was happening? I stiffened, and Asukai Jin's fingers clustered like he was holding a pen, then moved, like he was drawing a line in the air.

It was like he was drawing a picture.

My jaw dropped, and he shrugged.

"I'm talking about a picture. I wanted to surprise people with it. The world might be aiming a little high, but every painter has that desire secretly lurking deep within, telling them they're an artist."

"…………" I was stunned.

"The girl is just a model. She's nothing more than that to me, personally, but I wonder if Kotoe-chan didn't mistake her for my girlfriend. That might have caused her to act out like she has. So I plan to find Kotoe, and talk to her, clear things up."

He smiled softly as he spoke.

"I…see," I managed to nod.

I felt like a decisive moment has just passed me by.

"I apologize for being so harsh earlier, but, you see, I was embarrassed. I didn't really doubt your friendship with Kotoe-chan," Asukai Jin said, and bowed his head.

"…………" I couldn't answer.

There was nothing left for me to say.

No matter how much I asked, he wasn't going to give me any more than this.

There was nothing else for me to do.

"Thank you," I said, weakly rising to my feet.

As I was about to leave, I turned back. "Oh, one more thing… what did you mean by 'sacrifice?'" I asked. "You said, 'I have to sacrifice the girl.' That's not exactly a pleasant image."

"Well, she's a model. She has to remain in the exactly the same position for eight hours, and I always feel a little guilty asking that of people. But what else can I do?" he said, without hesitation.

I bowed awkwardly, and left the room.

And then I ran.

I'm not sure where to, but I couldn't stand being there a second longer.

(Damn it——!)

I knew something was horribly twisted.

But I had no idea what it was. This was the second time in my life I had ever bitterly regretted being nothing more than some boring and ordinary girl.

(Damn it! I'm an idiot! Such a shithead! Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid stupid…!!!)

I raged internally, cursing myself.

***

"Why did I let her go…?" Asukai whispered to himself, left alone in the guidance counselor's office.

"There was nothing about that girl to make her special." Asukai looked at the door she'd left through. "So…why did she know?"

"It's an awfully lonely picture."

"No matter how you look at that picture, there's no trace of the painter's intentions."

"How did she…?"

She said she wanted to save Kinukawa Kotoe, and she meant it. She was serious.

That seriousness had left Asukai feeling utterly defeated.

"Yes, Suema Kazuko-san. Exactly as you say," he murmured. His face looked like that of a badly hurt boy. Like he was about to cry, struggling furiously to stop himself.

At that moment, his phone rang.

His face snapped up, and he answered quickly.

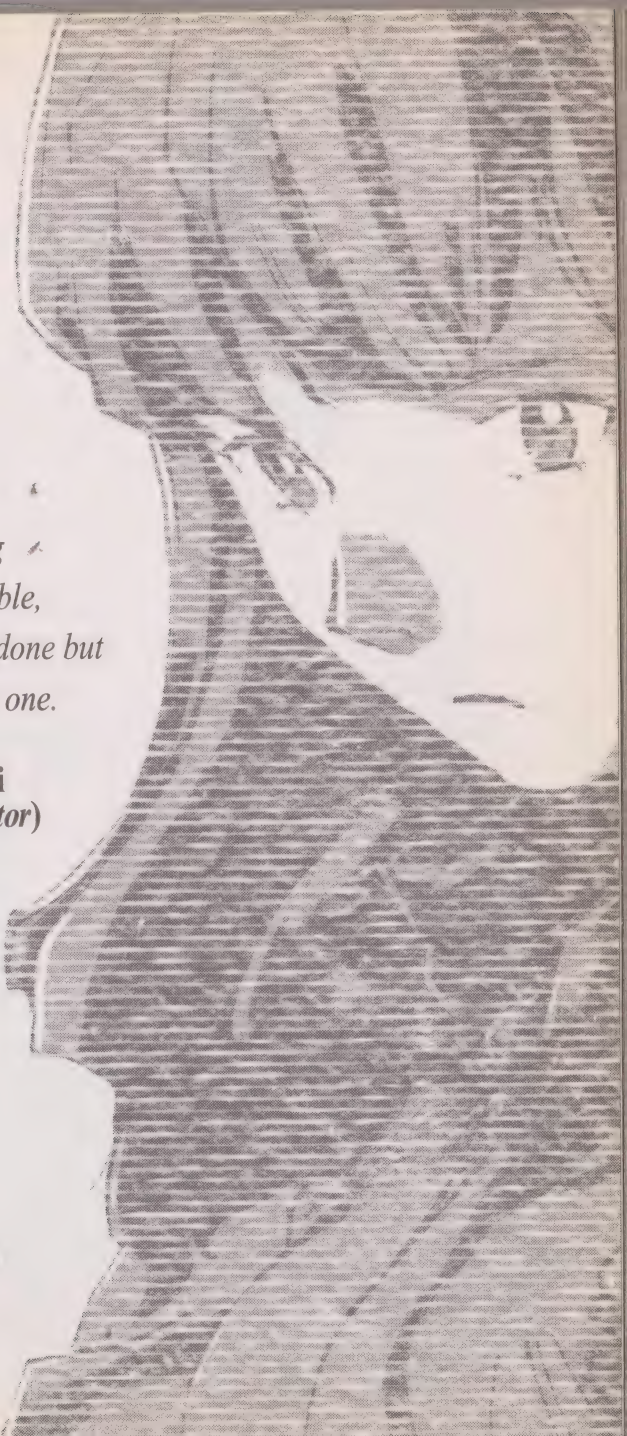
He listened for a moment, then nodded. "Okay."

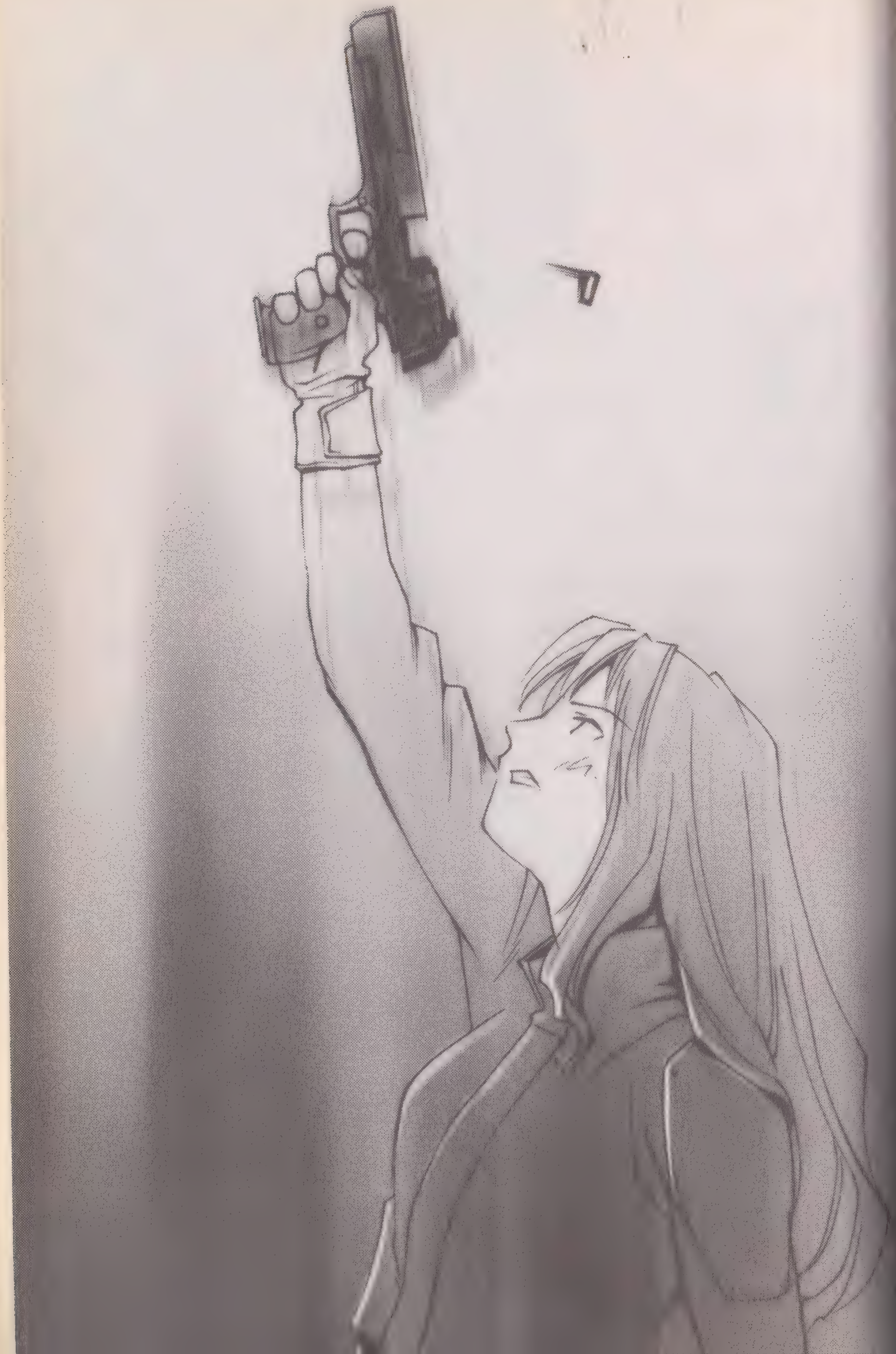
The person on the other end said something else, and he shook his head. "No, it seems we have to move quickly," he said. "Yeah. At this point, we can't avoid a fight. Yes, I'll take Spooky E out personally."

IV

Once something
has begun to crumble,
There is nothing to be done but
rebuild from square one.

—Kirima Seiichi
(*VS Imaginator*)





When I could sleep, I would go into a movie theater, and sit on the side in the very front row, where nobody would ever come. The times were always different; sometimes in the morning, sometimes at night. I doubt I ever snored. Nobody ever woke me up.

At night, I would find a 24-hour family restaurant, and wait for sunrise. I'd sit there, reading manga or something, to keep from being noticed. I was hardly the only one doing this, so I didn't stand out too much.

I wondered if my sister had filed a missing person's report with the police, so I started wearing glasses as a disguise, but I never met anyone who seemed to be looking for me.

And when I wasn't resting…I was Boogiepop.

Kids my age would attack drunken businessmen in groups to steal their money and prove their strength.

Suddenly, their attack would be interrupted by a dark, cloaked figure, who would spout haughty bullshit like, “How sad you are,” and then beat the crap out of them before fleeing like the wind.

Obviously, I did this because I didn’t want the people I saved to get a good look at my face.

Half the time, though, I didn’t know which side was to blame, but I always took the side of the underdog.

But if the people I saved seemed like they were going to exact revenge, I’d put them down too. Then I’d blow a whistle, like the kind police use, and vanish before anyone arrived.

…As soon as I was safely away, I’d slip into the shadows, whip off my costume, and stuff it into my bag before walking away with as innocent an expression as I could muster, always thinking:

‘What am I *doing*?’

‘Man, I’m certainly getting good at running away…’

And the like.

I’d given up the makeup. It was dark, and no one would be able to recognize me anyway.

Besides…it was always Orihata who was putting on the makeup. Without her here, I could never get it right.

“Ow…”

I glanced at my fist, and found I’d hurt it again.

My movements were becoming wild. My *shishou* always said there were no moves in karate that would allow you to injure yourself, and if there were, that was a sign you had not yet trained enough, or you were losing control. Both were true for me now.

I put some cold spray on the bruise, and put a pair of gloves over it, the sort of first aid Orihata had once done for me. Damn, I was thinking about her again.

"Argh…"

My opponents were nothing much, so I was narrowly scraping by, but if I actually ran into anyone dangerous, I'd be in serious trouble.

Most weapons, like knives, all I have to do is dodge, but if someone had a gun, I'd be a goner.

And then what would happen to me? Would this be what Orihata needed?

Absently munching on spaghetti carbonara (plus salad), pondering things, a thought struck me.

'Was this a roundabout way of killing myself…?'

I knew I was pretty desperate, but did I really want to die?

"…………"

Carbonara sauce is made from soft-boiled eggs, and tastes terrible cold, so my mouth never stopped moving the whole time I was thinking.

I even asked a waiter for a refill on my coffee.

"…………"

I added a lot of cream and sugar, and took a sip.

Even I was amazed at how low my sense of danger was.

I was ultra calm.

I didn't know what the hell I was trying to do, and nobody would ever praise me for it. I was gradually forgetting the correct movements for karate, flailing wildly and becoming a menace to myself.

(Hunh…)

I knew all of this, but I didn't seem to care.

Why not? Was something wrong with me? Well, that much was obvious, but exactly what was wrong?

(Hmmm…)

I thought about Orihata. I felt no anger towards her. I wasn't playing Boogiepop to get attention. I was actually hoping that she'd forgotten all about me.

When I remembered how I'd fawned over her, I was embarrassed. I couldn't forget how pathetic I was with my head in the clouds.

(Okay…)

…I think I'm playing Boogiepop to apologize to her. If what I was doing was in any way useful to her…this thought was driving me.

(Man, what self-centered logic.)

I was unable to suppress a self-deprecating giggle.

Here I was, fully aware that the girl I'd been going out with had never really been in love with me at all. Yet, I couldn't stop letting her memory dictate my every move. God, I'm a loser.

(So stupid…)

I giggled again, but by this point I was pretending to read a manga anthology so that nobody would look at me suspiciously. Damn, but I'm getting too good at this.

The waiter passed by, and I ordered another cup of coffee.

***

“It’s him. No doubt about it,” Kinukawa Kotoe said, looking at Taniguchi Masaki, where he sat in the window of a family restaurant.

She and six others were standing on the other side of a four-lane road, across from the restaurant.

From the side, they looked like they just happened to all be waiting for the light to change so they could cross.

The other six were all thin men. Their ages varied, as did their clothes, from suits to school uniforms, leather jackets and jeans. The only thing linking them together was their singular lack of expression. This was the only thing, yet this distinguishing feature made it plain to see…they were all Spooky E’s ‘terminals.’

“Heh…” Kotoe grinned, seeing Masaki’s glasses. “What a crappy disguise. Still, he was pretty good at running and hiding. Took some doing to track him down.”

“…………”

“…………”

The men behind her made no response.

The light changed, and a motorcycle pulled to a stop in front of them.

They stepped forward to cross the street, but Kotoe said softly, “No, wait…”

Masaki was about to leave the restaurant. It looked like he was going to prowl a little more tonight.

"He looks serious. Split into three groups and tail him."

They started across the street, passing in front of the stopped motorcycle.

There was nothing strange about the motorcycle at first glance, but on closer inspection, the driver was a little unusual. She wore a leather jumpsuit and safety boots. The kind people wear in a factory to stay intact, even if several tons fall on them. There was a military style backpack slung over her shoulders.

Her face was hidden beneath a full face helmet, but she was clearly female.

Kotoe's group reached the other side, and started following after Masaki. He had the Boogiepop disguise in a bag on his shoulder. Two of them took the lead, and the others took side streets, temporarily staying out of sight.

The signal changed.

"__________"

The biker girl made a sudden sharp turn into the other side of the road, and roared off back the way she had come.

***

(Only two following me…?)

Of course, I had noticed.

The moment I saw that woman—the girl who had been so snide with Orihata, Kinukawa Kotoe—I knew the moment I'd been waiting for had come. Luckily, it looked like they didn't know that I was onto them.

I made a show of heading to a deserted area of town, like I'm sure they hoped I would, and then turned into a shopping area and had some fun going up and down elevators for a while.

It looked like there were several of them trading off, but I wasn't worried. I knew someone was after me the whole time, so I didn't bother trying to distinguish between them.

(Okay. Now what?)

I was having trouble deciding. I did have an idea, but it was a tad…out there.

(Right then…still not gonna change the fact that I'm pathetic.)

I left the main streets for a stretch of dimly lit back roads.

I knew this area well. This was the type of place I'd often patrol as Boogiepop.

And this alley leading down to the station had a special place in my heart. I hadn't been there in almost six months, though…

Yet, it still smelled of stagnant water. You could never call it beautiful.

"…………"

It made me a little sad.

I'm sure I'm far too young to reminisce, but if I had no future, then who cares if I act like an old man? I just went for it.

This was the place where I'd been surrounded by *kouhai* from my Junior High school…where I'd been saved by Orihata Aya…where I first met her—

(Man, she sure bowled me over. I mean, just look at how she…)

I could feel my face turning red at the thought of that memory. I brushed it off with a chuckle to myself.

Footsteps came towards me from behind.

I grinned, and dove into the shadows.

The footsteps sped up. They were on the offensive. They weren't going to just follow me around any longer.

Another set of footsteps came towards me from the opposite direction. They had me surrounded.

"Where is he?"

I could hear voices.

"He's gotta be hiding somewhere!"

"Don't panic. Every way out of here's a dead end. He must be here somewhere!"

I started counting.

(One, two…six in all. Basically, the same number I saw from the window.)

All men.

"We split up and search?"

"No. Wait. I have a plan." This was Kinukawa Kotoe's voice. That made seven.

They were all here.

I started to move, slowly and carefully. Her voice grew louder.

"Hey! Taniguchi Masaki-kun! Are you still in love with Orihata Aya?"

I didn't answer.

"Do you know what she really is?" Kinukawa continued. "She never let you screw her, did she? Such a shame. After all the experience she's had with those other guys…you know what they call her behind her back? The public toilet."

She was trying to provoke me. Trying to make me mad.

I didn't answer.

"And you've got a pathetic sense of duty to a bitch like that? How can you be fooled by that little goody two shoes exterior of hers?!"

In the darkness, I grasped the Nike bag, now much lighter.

For a second, I closed my eyes.

In my mind's eye, I pictured her.

"You're really strong, aren't you?"

"Masaki…will you become him?"

Wrong, Orihata.

I'm not strong at all. Truth is, I don't have any idea what's right. Only way I get by is from paying close attention to the expressions of the people around me.

But I think I can 'become' him. When you said that…when I was with you—

It might just have been a delusion. But I don't care if it was—even without evidence, without proof…*isn't that what **this** is*?

"That girl's better than anyone at fooling men. I almost feel sorry for how you jumped right into her trap. You're the saddest person in the world—"

As Kinukawa was talking, there was a sudden noise from behind her.

The men rushed towards it. One of them kicked over a pile of wooden crates, exposing something hidden in the shadows.

The empty Nike bag, lying right where I'd flung it.

"——!"

The men stiffened—their backs to me.

Surprise attacks are over in seconds.

I kicked them in the back, right between the spine and ribs, three of them in less than two seconds.

"GUH!"

All three of them went flying.

The other three turned towards me. As I'd expected, they all had guns.

But I was very close to them. I could attack as fast as they could aim.

I bent down and swung my leg, sweeping the legs out from all three of them.

All three lost their balance and fell over.

I leapt on them, slamming my knee into two of them.

Leaving them crumpled, I slammed my elbow into the third.

When I stood up again, all six of them were unconscious.

"————"

I quickly picked up one of the dropped guns.

Spinning around, I released the safety, and aimed it right at Kinukawa Kotoe. And yes, I'd held a real gun before, back in Phnom Penh, and I sure was ready to use it.

She froze instantly. "…T-taniguchi Masaki," she stammered.

"I think I may have underestimated…"

"I'm not Taniguchi Masaki," I interrupted, quietly.

I wore a black hat and cloak. In this outfit, "I am Boogiepop."

I stepped slowly forward, and placed the barrel of the gun against her chin.

But she wasn't the least bit frightened. She gave me a confident grin. "Okay, point for you. You've earned my respect. If I told Axis about you, they'd probably pick you up, convinced you were the real thing."

I had no idea what she was talking about.

"Tell me what you did to Orihata," I said, trying to suppress my anger, but well aware that I was failing. I was this close to the edge.

"But I just *did.* That was all true. She really has been with any number of men."

"Did you make her do that?!"

"So what if I did? She still didn't tell you; she still betrayed you."

"Augh……" My eyes misted over.

I suddenly understood what she had meant all those times she'd said she was sorry.

But I was a fool. I hadn't noticed. All this time, she'd been asking for help.

"I'll ask you again…where is Orihata?!"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Fuck you!" Ignoring the fact that she was a girl, I smacked her with the butt of the gun.

She spat blood, and fell over into the ditch water.

Even then, she smiled.

"Hee hee hee hee…go ahead and *kill me*. After all, I've had my way with your woman all along!"

"Graah!" I could feel my head ignite.

My hands were shaking so hard I could barely keep the gun pointed at her.

I could pull that trigger at any second.

"I'd planned to leave a corpse for everyone to blame, but I'm just as happy leaving you a murderer…how about it?" she wheedled, venomous.

"Sh-shit…!" Wave after wave of hatred poured out of me. I couldn't stop it.

With a will of its own, my fingers pulled back the hammer.

With a click, it was ready to fire.

"Rrrrrrrrr!" Grinding my teeth, I could hear my blood roaring in my ears.

***

"…Mm?" Kinukawa Kotoe frowned, puzzled.

Even though I looked ready to shoot her at any second, her gaze was directed not at me, but at something behind me.

Alarmed, I spun around.

Too late.

Someone had snuck up behind me, and they touched my neck, moving much faster than me. A shock ran through my body.

"GACK—?!"

Suddenly unable to move, I toppled over.

Electricity—a stun gun.

"Idiot," said a voice I'd heard before—a girl's voice.

But could it really be her…?

I struggled to turn my head, and at last succeeded. It *was* her.

"I thought you were up to something dumb, but Christ…if I let you kill someone, how the hell could I ever face your parents?"

Only one girl talked like a boy and ran around in a leather jumpsuit and safety boots, heedless of how they looked.

"N-nagi-neesan…?" My sister.

"I *told* you, don't call me 'Neesan,'" she snarled. No one else talked like her. "And why in god's name are you dressed like *that*? I dunno who the hell put you up to it, but you are a grade A dumbass," she spit her words, tearing Boogiepop's hat and cloak off me while I was still paralyzed.

"Who the hell are you?" Kinukawa Kotoe asked, trying to get to her feet. But Nagi poked her with her stungun, which was the rod kind, much like a police truncheon.

"You aren't going anywhere, Kinukawa Kotoe."

"Whaaat?! You know me?" Kotoe stared, amazed.

My sister snorted. "Thought so. Girl like Kinukawa Kotoe, suddenly acting crazy…"

"What do you mean?!"

"*You* aren't Kinukawa," she said quietly. "You're just borrowing her face, or maybe you brainwashed her. I dunno, but absolutely every student at Shinyo Academy knows who I am."

She looked awfully used to this.

"What are you?" Kotoe asked.

"I'm not big on giving out my name as much as *he* is. And I'm the one asking questions. Who's controlling you?" she asked, pointedly.

I was confused now.

What the…?

Brainwashed?

So it wasn't this woman who'd done something to Orihata?

"…………" Kotoe fell silent.

Then her face twisted into a smile again.

"Oooooh…I get it. I found you, buried down in Kinukawa Kotoe's memories. You're that 'Fire Witch.' Didn't seem that important, at the time, but I guess I blew it, not leaving that in the conscious registers. Never thought the class delinquent would be doing something like this."

This was nothing like the way Kotoe had been talking—she sounded like a middle-aged man with the face of a girl.

"Answer me," my sister said, unmoved. Was she always doing stuff like this?

"My, my. First him, then the Imaginator, now you…problems everywhere I turn." Whatever was inside her grinned at us. Her eyes stayed perfectly round, which made the smile that much more sinister. "Good thing I took the precaution of sending in two teams."

She snapped her fingers.

"……!"

My sister suddenly flung herself to the side.

And from above, one after another, something—no, someone, fell on her.

Punk-styled men were attacking from the air!

(WHAT—?!)

I looked up. Out of the second floor staircase window of the building beside us came a swarm of punks, skinheads, and yakuza-looking men, all leaping down into the alley. Like the first bunch, this motley crew seemed to have nothing to do with each other.

The six men I'd knocked out earlier were just the main course? These others had all been waiting on standby?!

"N-nagi-neesa—!" I tried to tell her to run, but…

"Hmph!"

Making a noise somewhere between a grunt and a chuckle, she dodged every nail-ridden bat they swung at her.

Then she'd kick them, zap them with her stungun, dodge a blow from behind without even looking…

It was all so fast…

She was taking on five or six at a time, never flinching, never hesitating—knocking them down like bowling pins. She was insanely strong.

(Wh-who the hell *is* she?)

By any standard, she was far stronger than me. And it wasn't because she had a weapon. No, she was good without one, but with a weapon, it was like it became an extension of her own body. It was a clear sign of just how good she was.

Now that I thought about it, I remember once asking my *shishou* what my sister, the daughter of his friend, had been like as a child.

Shishou had laughed, and said only this: "I couldn't keep up with her."

But I'd never thought he meant it *literally*.

"…………"

Both body and mind now stunned and unable to move, Nagi suddenly grabbed me by the front of my shirt and flung me across the alley.

'Aaah!' I thought, and a second later, a skinhead landed where I'd been lying. She'd saved me from getting trampled.

Now *that* is true strength.

Bam, bam, all the punks went flying, kicked or zapped.

"……"

I no longer understood anything, but did my best to move, trying to keep out of my sister's way.

Suddenly, a yakuza-looking guy landed right in front of me.

I panicked for a moment, but he was out cold. Wasn't even twitching.

Just as I started to get angry with him for startling me, I noticed the key holder hanging from his alligator belt.

There were a bunch of keys that looked to go to various motorcycles and cars, and so on, but the one my eyes had latched onto, was…

"Th-that's…"

I forced my frozen arm through horrible pain, and grabbed the key.

I'd seen that key before.

I'd seen her holding it, once.

"Oh god…"

It belonged to Orihata. It was her apartment key.

***

"Shit—! What *is* she?!" Kinukawa Kotoe snarled, watching the terminals get pulverized by one girl. Kotoe picked up the gun Taniguchi Masaki had dropped, and fired it in the girl's direction.

It hit the girl square in the back.

"Unh!" She fell forwards…and turned it into a forward somersault. She was back on her feet in a second flat.

Bulletproof clothing—!

She spun towards Kotoe, and glared at her.

"Sh-shit!" Kotoe fired the gun a few times. But the enemy was moving too fast, and none of the bullets hit her. Most of them hit her allies, the terminals.

They, however, were not bulletproof. They simply toppled over, spurting blood.

"Stop it!" the girl roared.

(I'm finished…!) Kotoe thought, and fled, abandoning her allies.

"Wait!" the girl called, but *that* wasn't going to happen.

"Keep her here!" Kotoe yelled at the terminals.

They did as they were told, flinging themselves at Taniguchi Masaki's sister, despite their wounds.

"Argh!" she roared, knocking them aside, one after the other.

When the last one went down, she looked around her.

There was no sign of Kotoe.

"Damn," she muttered. Then she noticed her brother was missing too. "That *idiot*!" she said, irritated, but her tone was more worried than annoyed.

"Okay. Guess I'll have to take care of you boys first," she said, looking down at the groaning terminal in front of her.

She poked her stun gun against his head.

"If this is the guy I think it is, this ought to fix things," and a weaker burst of electricity coursed through the terminal's head.

She repeated this with all of them. Even those with gunshot wounds—none of the wounds were fatal, so she let them be.

"Okay…" she said, looking up. She checked to see just how many power lines were running overhead.

Then she picked up the five guns lying on the ground. They all had silencers on them, so she unscrewed them, and held the pieces in both hands.

She fired and fired until there were no bullets left, leaving the street echoing with more gunfire than a yakuza flick.

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Kinukawa Kotoe heard the noise as well.

"What—?!"

She had already fled onto a different street, but the noise carried like the wind.

Everyone in earshot knew something was up.

(What is that crazy bitch thinking…?)

The people around her were turning their heads, and moving towards the noise. Presumably they had never heard real gunshots before. In this respect, Japan was still a peaceful country.

But Kotoe had no intention of turning back and making sure of anything. She wanted to get away as quickly as humanly possible.

But, as everyone around her headed towards the noise, and Kotoe started up the road in a temporary vacuum, her feet suddenly stopped.

A man was standing in front of her.

He was not heading towards the noise, but looking right at her, waiting quietly.

He was wearing white.

"……….."

Kotoe could not understand why this had such an impact on her. To be strictly accurate, the surface consciousness Spooky E had imprinted on Kotoe did not understand.

(Who…is this again?)

She thought, mystified to find herself fretting because he'd seen her.

"……….."

The man in white moved slowly towards her.

He looked very sad. Kotoe felt that expression was very familiar.

Like something she had long since left behind…

"Wh………wh-who……are you?!" she shrieked.

Right there in the middle of the street, heedless as to who might see her, she pulled out her gun and pointed it at the man.

"…………" The man in white kept walking toward her.

Kotoe took a step backwards, helpless.

She couldn't let him get close to her. She couldn't even look at his face.

She had to run away. She turned her back and took a step…

And he grabbed her hand.

"—Kotoe-chan," he whispered.

When she heard his voice, Kotoe burst into tears. "L-let go!" she screamed, but it was a very feeble scream.

The man in white did as she asked.

Kotoe staggered, tripped over her own feet, no longer able to walk.

The man was in front of her again.

"I've known how you felt for a long time," he said, quietly.

Kotoe could not answer. Consciously, she was unable to understand anything he said, but her body had frozen, unable to react.

"Wh-what…?" slipped out of her mouth despite this, but he ignored it completely.

"I know that you were, in your own fashion, quite serious about me. But at the same time, *I could see you*. So I knew very well that, even if you loved me, you would never become happy." His voice droned on and on, like some sort of machine.

"Ahhhh…" Kotoe began shaking.

"Your feelings are, sadly, nothing more than childish admiration, Kotoe-chan. You will never be able to truly love anything. That's the way you are. Half of your feelings for me were nothing more than pity. You were only able to convince yourself that this was love because you are still a child."

"Aaaah…"

"And you will always be lonely. You will never understand why you seem to be incapable of being truly passionate about anything…which will be an eternal source of sorrow. That's why I interested you. I appeared to be sad, and you wondered if I was the same as you—but that was a delusion."

"Aaaaaaaahhhh…"

"I never really felt sadness. Only despair. I lacked a future, but had no feelings like yours. Whatever you wanted from me, I could have given you nothing."

"Aaaaaaahhhhh, aahhh…"

From the moment he started talking, Kotoe had been bawling. Her face was frozen and expressionless, but her tears were pouring down her cheeks.

"There is no world where we can be together," he said, and closed his mouth at last.

"Ah, aaaaah, aaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh…"

Kotoe shook so hard she almost fell over, and had to grab onto the man for support.

"……H……he……help……" her expression shattered, and she struggled to say something through her tears. "……Help…

help me…help me, Jin-niisan……help me!"

A name she should not have been able to say escaped her lips.

Like a lost child who has at last found its parents, she clung to the man—to her beloved Asukai Jin.

"—If I only could," he said, in the same quiet voice. "I've been hoping I could for a long time now. If only I could help you…but I can't. I still have no idea what to do for you. I know that you should not be with me. Regardless of what you felt that night you spoke to me, when I was waiting for snow alone outside."

Only this last line showed any trace of warmth.

Kotoe was well beyond her stress limits, and was unable to stop her consciousness from fading away. "Jin…nii…sa…n……"

The world in front of her darkened. From the darkness, she heard a voice, unchanged from a moment before, ask, "Where is Spooky E?"

Kotoe might have said something in reply. But she was no longer capable of knowing what.

For a second, she felt as if she were being embraced, but it may just have been her imagination.

"I'm sorry. Goodbye," came a voice from so far away that it may well have been in the next world. It was the last time she ever heard it……

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……When people came back, they found a girl lying in the middle of the road. She was taken away in an ambulance, and regained consciousness a few hours later. She attempted to explain herself to the policeman sitting by her side, but he only nodded kindly.

“We’ve figured out most of it by now.”

The gunfire incident concluded in a rather odd manner, since almost everyone involved had received an electric shock, and was unable to remember anything about it. The forensics team believed that one of the bullets had struck a power line, which in turn had sent a current running through the ditch water left standing in the alley. The area was a mess, and they were unable to find any further evidence.

There were a few witnesses, but all of them just said stuff like, “I didn’t see anyone else come out of there.” So they were forced to conclude that the scuffle had ended in this extremely unusual fashion.

The reason for the scuffle was lost in a sea of confusion, but at least a few of the people lying there were known drug dealers, which made things simple. The punks, skinheads, and indie musicians lying around them remembered being asked by the girl to look for something. The police in turn concluded that she had been the leader, and had been investigating ties to a possible drug syndicate. As further evidence, a strange outfit often described by recently arrested drug dealers was found lying at the scene.

“The only thing left is motive, which we heard as well. Your cousin cooperated with us once before. He was involved in a case where one of your friends died. He told us you were unable to let that situation rest."

"Really?"

"Yep. It was pretty bad. She was so far into withdrawal, the pain led her to stab herself in the throat. I know just how you feel."

"My friend…" she said absently, lying still in her hospital bed.

She was a little out of it.

The police were not surprised. "You've done a few things we could probably charge you for, but really, why? Mitigating circumstances are good enough for me. The people who helped you will get off with a suspended sentence as well, I think. After all, you have managed to completely destroy a drug operation."

"…………"

"I'm gonna let you take it easy and start recovering from shock now," the policeman said kindly.

All she could do was thank him, in a voice without emotion.

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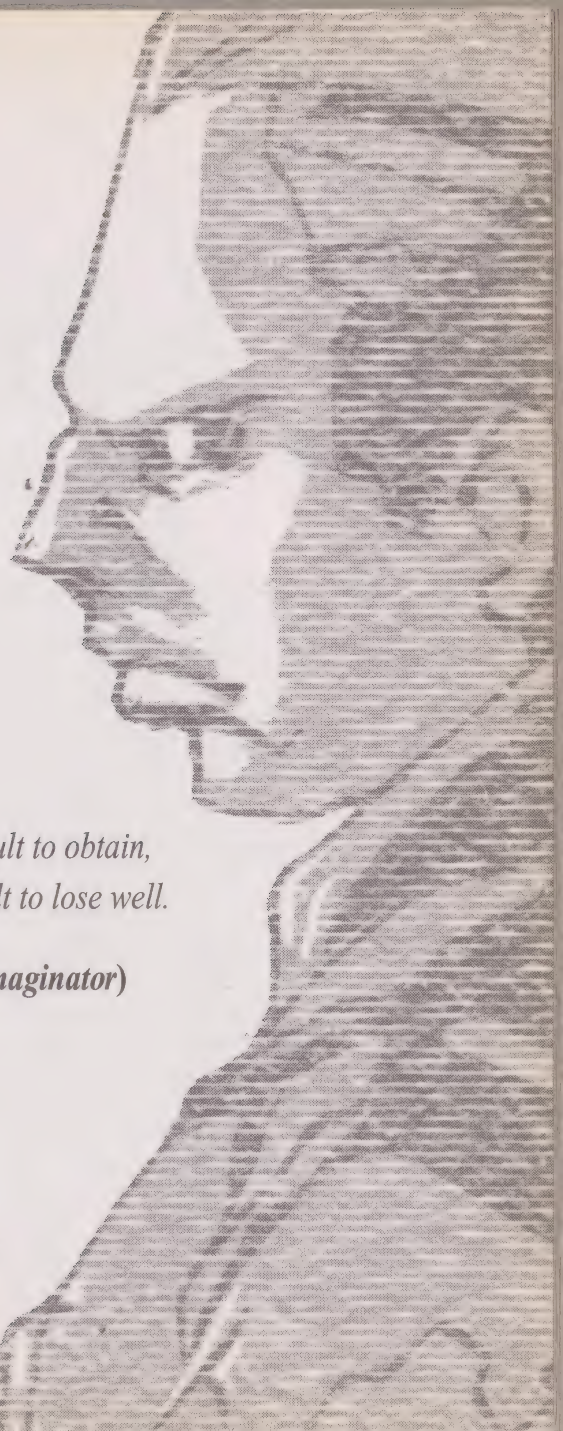


A perfect victory is difficult to obtain,
But it is even more difficult to lose well.

—Kirima Seiichi (*VS Imaginator*)

Trying not to puke from the lingering effects of the stun gun my sister had zapped me with, I boarded a bus and headed straight for Orihata's apartment building.

(Urp……)

The more you try to suppress the urge, the more attention you attract. I barely managed to look normal.

I had lost the Boogiepop outfit Orihata had made me.

That felt strange.

I felt like that had been the link between us, and without it, I couldn't settle down.

But I could no longer rely on it. Either way, Kinukawa Kotoe had been taken into custody, and there was no way for me to ask her where Orihata was.

I got off the bus, and walked the route to Orihata's apartment, which I had followed countless times before (to which I always turned back at the entrance).

I was a little worried that someone would stop me, but no one ever did, and I was soon standing outside the door to her apartment.

I rang the bell, my heart pounding.

There was no answer…

I rang it again.

Still nothing…

I gritted my teeth, pulled out the key, and unlocked the door.

Now that I thought about it, Orihata had never once actually come over to my home, and this was my first time ever entering hers. Yeah, all things considered, we had had a rather strange relationship.

"Hello?" I whispered, stepping in.

My feet stopped almost instantly.

"Uh……?!"

The room was empty.

There wasn't a trace of anyone living here.

"W-wait a minute…" I said, flustered.

This was absurd. I had dropped her off here almost every day, and the key was the right key, so…feeling myself beginning to panic, I looked around the apartment again, and found a sleeping bag lying in the corner of the empty living room.

I gulped.

I crept over to it, and picked it up by the corner.

I sniffed—I know, kinda creepy—and it smelled like her hair did whenever she leaned in close to powder my face in makeup.

(Orihata——slept here?)

I dropped the sleeping bag and peered around the room.

Her Shinyo Academy uniform was hanging on the wall.

I opened the closet, and found the rest of her clothes. I'd seen everything in there. It was all of the clothes she'd ever worn on our dates.

And that was it…

Nothing casual, nothing for around the house. No sweatshirts, no jerseys, no pajamas. Nothing.

"……….."

Hesitantly, I opened what I assumed was her underwear drawer.

Only one type, and they were all lined up. It was as if she'd bought them on sale somewhere.

"……….."

I glanced back towards her clothes.

I had seen all of them…but one set was missing.

"Where are the clothes she was wearing the last time I saw her…?" I said with an uneasy feeling gnawing at my gut.

I went into the kitchen. The stove looked barely even used, so I looked in her garbage. It was filled with empty convenience store *bento*. I flipped through each of them.

No recent dates…

The most recent one was the day before I last saw her.

"………" I felt suddenly dizzy, and fell over on the floor.

(What does this *mean*—?)

Where was Orihata?

I felt like I was overlooking something important.

But what?

What was I forgetting?

***

—Meanwhile, in an abandoned, half-finished, suburban amusement park near the city, another man was equally confused.

(What's going on?)

Spooky E was furiously dialing one number after another, his always pasty features even paler, trying to contact the 'terminals' he'd brainwashed.

But not one of them would respond. Every phone was turned off.

(Shit! How can this happen?)

Blood spurted out of the wound where his right ear had been. His teeth chattered away.

His hair had gone from simply graying to completely gray.

Fear.

It was the one thing tormenting him now.

If his terminals did not respond, then his power over them had been lifted.

Which (to him) meant he had lost all proof of his existence.

This had happened before—a boy had somehow slipped out from under his control, but he had convinced himself this was an isolated occurrence and merely coincidental.

No, he had *tried* to convince himself.

Without his power, he was in the same position as the object of his abuse and scorn, Orihata Aya…if not worse.

Orihata Aya would be able to carry on somehow, testing to see if cross breeding were possible, but he had no chance of anything like that.

He would be completely useless.

And, probably, disposed of.

(This can't be happening!)

He opened his hands, and let electricity crackle across his palms. He could see the sparks, hear the sound of air burning.

(It's still working—I'm not finished yet! So why——?)

He forced power into his jaw, and managed to stop his teeth from dancing.

Normally, this would be no time to be holed up in an abandoned, half-finished amusement park like this. He should be down in town, trying to work out what was wrong. But…

"D-d-d-damn you…"

He couldn't do that.

He was too scared, too frightened to see things with his own eyes.

"Damn it…damn it!"

What worried him the most was the lack of response from Kinukawa Kotoe, who he had spent so much time on. Even if the others fizzled out, she had been a virtual copy of himself, so how could she possibly escape his control?

"Impossible! It's completely impossible!"

Blood glurped out of his ear wound again.

He sat trembling in the darkness a while longer, but at last he got control of himself and stood up.

He walked slowly to the top of the tower he was hiding in.

The roof of the half-finished tower was covered in building materials, and he made a b-line for one particularly innocuous-looking pile.

"If it's come to this…"

There were seven canisters, none especially large.

Each one contained enough bioweaponry to wipe out every living person in the area.

Specifically, it was a toxic virus genetically engineered to dissipate and die within three hours of being released into the air—or thirty minutes in daylight.

But during that time, the virus would multiply explosively, infect every living thing it came into contact with, and melt every cell in their body. Eventually, the virus would begin to cannibalize itself, leaving nothing untouched in its wake.

It was described as the ultimate "antibiotic"—one so powerful that it could disinfect life itself.

But Spooky E was hardly concerned about such details. His body already had immunities to the virus; so no matter how much 'death' he spread, he would never feel so much as a sniffle.

"I could use this…"

If he killed everyone, he might be able to hide the fact that his ability had failed…!

He reached his hand towards the valve on top of one of the canisters.

"Then…!" There was a gleam in his big eyes.

But his hand suddenly froze, like something was pulling it back.

He raised his head, and stared around him.

"What…?!"

He heard footsteps. Someone was here.

Quite a lot of people were here.

He looked over the edge of the tower at the ground below.

His expression stiffened.

"………"

There was a crowd of people staring up at him.

He recognized at least half of them.

Naturally, they were the people he had brainwashed.

"Wh-what the *hell*?!" he roared.

But none of them made any response. It was as if they hadn't even heard him.

They simply stared calmly up at him, in silence.

"A-answer me! What the hell are—!" he shouted hysterically.

A voice from behind him said, "At last we meet, Spooky Electric-kun."

It was a young man's voice. Spooky E twitched like he was jolted with electricity, then spun around.

A man in white clothes—Asukai Jin—was standing at the entrance to the roof.

"Wh-who are you?!" Spooky E screamed.

Asukai Jin did not answer. He stared at the canister behind Spooky E.

"Oh, I see. The 'disinfectant.' You were going to use that?

Cut it close then."

"What the hell are you?!" Spooky E shrieked, and at last Asukai met his gaze.

"That's a strange question."

"Wh-what?!"

"I thought you were looking for me. Was I wrong?" Asukai said, shrugging. "If you must say something, it should be, 'I guess the time has come,' or something like that."

"Th-then……y-you are……" Spooky E took a step backwards. He bumped against the canister.

"You know me as 'The Imaginator,'" Asukai said, grinning.

Spooky E gasped. "What…did you do? How—?!"

He knew the man in front of him was his greatest threat.

"I'm just better than you," Asukai said quietly and with utter confidence.

"Guh……!"

"The Towa Organization, was it? Your syndicate…no, system?" Asukai trilled.

"Y-you know…?"

"Not any specifics. Just that this system is…"observing" things. I must say, you've got quite some people working for you."

Spooky E made another choking sound.

"What are you observing? What conditions are you searching for?" Asukai asked, peacefully. "I've thought of many things, but have only been able to come up with one working theory."

Spooky E was shaking like a leaf.

"'Transformation.' What else? Anything that changes? That's what you're watching, correct? You give ordinary, innocent humans drugs and observe their reactions, and then you investigate how much they change…am I right?"

"Unh…"

"From which we can determine that the Towa Organization operates on a scale much too grand to be referred to as a mere syndicate. Essentially, everything in the 'present'—whether they hate all things new and different, or whether they are trying to bend these new things to their will—has collectively produced what is known as the Towa Organization. Obviously, this means their power is incredibly vast. However…" Asukai shot Spooky E another grin. "In this area, at the moment, there is only you. Correct?"

He smiled with only his eyes, his eyes declaring that Spooky E would not be saved, would not be able to escape.

"Grrraagh…!" Spooky E ground his teeth, blood spraying out of his missing ear again. "Y-you…you know that much…but do you have any idea what that means?"

"Mm?"

"No matter what you do to me, you have no future!" Spooky E bellowed. "You can't survive long with the Towa Organization as your enemy! When you end my life—you end yours!" His shrill voice was almost completely swept away by the high wind blowing across the tower roof.

"…………" Asukai Jin just kept on smiling, staring at Spooky E. "My enemy?" He nodded to himself. Then his mouth twisted into a smirk. “My enemy!”

“What’s so funny?”

“Speaking of enemies…do you have any idea?”

“Of what?”

“How many people died because of the ‘experiments’ you’ve been conducting? People who coincidentally had an allergic reaction to the drugs you fed them…or who went into shock. Here’s a hint, it’s no small number.”

“So what? They aren’t important!”

“True. They aren’t,” Asukai agreed, calmly. “The percentage of deaths is much lower than traffic accidents, or disease. You could certainly say that anyone that happened to die that way was simply unlucky…nothing more. But every human has someone who depends on them. Don’t you understand? They have friends…family.”

“…?” Spooky E frowned, unable to figure out what Asukai was driving at.

“He certainly was unlucky. He always did have bad luck,” Asukai said, his gaze drifting marginally skywards. “He had no ‘roots,’ you see. Everything he tried, he did timidly. Yet his ‘flower’ was gigantic, which meant he’d jump on board any fool’s dream, get tricked again, and just wind up in trouble. I had to cover for him so many times.” A self-deprecating grin passed across his face. “But that was all in vain. No matter how hard I worked, I could not make up for his utter lack of fortune.”

“What do you mean? What are you talking about?”

“I suppose it was he who gave me *The Little Prince*.” Asukai sighed, and fixed his gaze on Spooky E again. "Enemy? No, this is revenge. This is the irony of fate."

"So tell me what you mean!"

"Just a little history," Asukai said suddenly.

"What…?"

"Have you ever considered who it is who ultimately wins? Is it the strongest? Is it the one who kept everyone under his thumb? What do you think happens to people like that in the end? I'll tell you…*nothing*. When they win, they use too much power, and collapse. Their victory is snatched away from them by someone else. When you face your enemy, you must make a more intelligent choice."

Asukai's smile vanished.

"The second option is to carefully surrender. You have plenty of power, but not enough to take on your opponent, so surrender is the best way to stay alive. But the first option——"

Unsmiling, his gaze was so pointed it seemed to pierce the other man's skin.

"Turn your enemy into your ally. This is the wisest, most effective method."

Spooky E's big eyes opened even wider. "Wh-what…?!"

"You and I are a lot alike. We're almost exactly the same. We have the same kind of power. Our abilities compliment each other."

Asukai spread his hands.

"In other words, as long as I keep doing the same kind of things, then as far as the Towa Organization is concerned, there is no real difference from when you did them."

"………..!" Spooky E's expression twisted. "Y-you can't mean…!"

"Yes, I can. I'm going to use you as cover while I take over the Towa Organization. Through you, I shall spread the Imaginator throughout the Towa Organization—at least, that's the plan."

Asukai took a step towards Spooky E.

Spooky E slid sideways past the canister at his back, trying to keep his distance. "B-but that's…"

"Forget can or can't. I have to. If I want to make snow fall in April everywhere in the world, I absolutely need a vast organization backing me."

"S-snow…?"

To any sensible human being, Spooky E was a monstrous being of unfathomable mystery…yet now he faced something far more inscrutable than himself for the first time since he had come into this world.

"Simply put, I plan to standardize humanity's psyche—putting an end to all the sadness, all the disconnections, all the misunderstandings that arise between us."

"Y-you're insane! You've completely lost your mind!"

"So what if I have? If you think yourself sane, then do something about this madman before you start insisting that I am," Asukai said, grinning.

"Ah……rraaaaaaaaah!" Spooky E bellowed as he leapt at Asukai, electricity sparking from both hands.

Asukai…did not dodge.

Spooky E's electric palms slapped him on the head like a sumo wrestler, knocking him over backwards.

(What——?!)

After all the confident speeches, Spooky E was completely thrown by his enemy's extreme weakness.

But he couldn't hesitate now. He attacked again.

Grabbing Asukai's head between both hands, he sent electricity——

Or at least, he tried to, but Asukai suddenly sprang forward, and Spooky E reflexively shrank backwards.

"Unh…" Big drops of battle sweat rolled down his fat cheeks and forehead.

"Pretty intense," Asukai said, shaking his head. Something fell off of it.

Something that made Spooky E's eyes bulge out of his head.

A wig, with smoke pouring off of it. The inside was covered in strips of something.

It was a glossless texture that Spooky E knew very well.

"A-anti-magnetic sheets?"

These were stickers designed to shield floppy discs from the magnets in purse latches and the like by halting all electromagnetic waves. Piling these on top of each other had effectively left Asukai's head wrapped into a sort of papier-mache helmet.

"Exactly! I had surmised that your ability was based on electromagnetic waves, so I came prepared," Asukai taunted. Without the wig, his hair looked exactly the same. He was busy shaking dust out of it, fragments fallen from the anti-magnetic sheets.

"………" Spooky E stared at the wig for a moment, but at last snorted loudly, then broke into a wild guffaw. "Bwa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!!"

"Is it funny?" Asukai asked.

Spooky E went right on laughing. "Ha ha! You were nothing more than a fraud all along! How can I *not* laugh? You had me running scared!"

"Am I?"

"Without that little trick of yours, you can't block my attack. We may be equally matched in the brainwashing department, but you're not even in the ballpark when it comes to fighting!"

"Ah, you could put it that way. Yes," Asukai hung his head.

"Give it up! You can never…" he started to say, but…

(……?)

Spooky E noticed something odd.

In Asukai Jin's right hand was a single rose. Held delicately in his fingertips.

(Where'd that come from?)

The rose had no roots. But it had not been cut; instead, the stem grew steadily smaller, tapering off to nothing. It was like an artificial flower, but it was too realistic, too fresh.

"Other people may not be able to see my 'visions,' but I imagine you can," Asukai said, twirling the rose around in his fingertips. "After all, this…is your 'psyche.'"

"More magic tricks?" Spooky E bellowed, and lunged at Asukai again.

Again, Asukai did not try to dodge. This time, there was nothing on his head to protect him.

(Don't need to hold back! Full storm power, fry every cell in his stupid brain!)

Spooky E reached out with both hands.

Asukai stood there, waiting for the blow to fall——

——But just before it did, Spooky E's body froze in place.

(Wh-what the——?)

He was right in front of Asukai Jin. His hands were just centimeters away from grabbing onto him…but he couldn't close that gap.

"Gr…grrrrr…?"

Clearly, it wasn't some invisible wall between them. It was more like Spooky E's body had become incredibly, amazingly heavy—too heavy to continue moving.

"M-my body…it…it won't move…!"

"Not your body. *Your mind*," Asukai said quietly, the rose still in his hand.

"Wh-what did you do to me?"

"Right now, no matter what, you will not work up the motivation to attack me. That's all. The only thing stopping you from moving is your own will. Your *own* unconscious will."

"H-how…?!"

"I removed the 'thorns' from your 'flower.' That's all."

"…………?!"

"But that seems to have *removed your very capacity for aggression.*"

Asukai spun the rose in his hand again. There were no thorns anywhere on the rose's stem.

"Th-that's impossible…" but even as he spoke, Spooky E toppled feebly over.

And with a thump, he was sitting on the floor of the roof.

"Unh…" he couldn't even roar.

Now he got it.

He knew why Asukai had used another cheap trick like those anti-magnetic sheets…it was so he couldn't run away.

First, he needed to make him attack, and then stop that attack. But he only needed to stop it once. If he managed to get close enough to Spooky E even for a moment, then he could take his 'rose.'

"Your power—this thing where you control a person's brain with electric shocks—is incredibly backwards," Asukai said, glaring down at Spooky E. "It lacks the concept of the 'soul.' You pay no attention to the principle force driving human behavior. You just jam a bit of information down on top of their minds, without ever really changing them in any real sense of the word. Compared to the Imaginator, you're just second rate."

"Unh…"

"You never thought to even do what I can—to perceive the flaws in human hearts, and discover how to repair them. Your method is like striking water with a hammer. The key point is to change your method, depending on who you are working with."

"Uuuuunh…"

"Told you I was better," Asukai said.

"Uuuuuuuunh," Spooky E moaned, reeling. It was just as

Asukai said; he had no urge to attack, and no strength anywhere in his body.

"Yet…I should admit that I do have to do much the same thing as you do with your lightning. There are just too many humans in this world."

"Wh-what have you done…what are you going to do now…?" Spooky E managed, listlessly.

"Grafting. You know the word? Where you take two similar plants, touch the parts that bear fruit together, and create an entirely new plant. Same principle. I have been taking groups of two or more, and using them to plant a small piece of what each of them lacked. Everyone I've done this for has been very happy, since their hearts are now perfect. And naturally, all of them have become my allies."

Asukai smiled gently.

"I can do the same thing for you. As soon as you find a partner, I can give you the 'roots' you lack. In return, I will take just a little sliver of your 'stem.' Of course, it'll cut down that strong mental power…but you'll hardly even notice. Not with the joy you'll be feeling once your flaw is healed."

"…………..." Spooky E looked dazed. "I don't…understand."

"Even you will understand soon."

Spooky E looked up at Asukai, his eyes unfocused. "What I don't understand is how you can be enjoying this. At least I was acting on orders from the Towa Organazation, but you… "

Asukai frowned, sharply.

Spooky E ignored him, dropping his gaze again. "Nah…well, that's really not important…there's only one thing left for me to look forward to."

He held his hands up in front of his face, staring at them.

"What's that?"

"Something I've wanted to do for a long time," he muttered. "But my hatred for *them* was too strong, so I never could. I couldn't do it while they were still living. But now those feelings are gone. Maybe because you took my 'thorns.' So for that, I guess I'm grateful to you…"

"What are you talking about?" Asukai asked, puzzled.

"Let me give you one warning…Imaginator! Boogiepop is after you," he said, and then Spooky E grabbed his own face.

Sparks flew.

"——!"

By the time a flustered Asukai reached his side, Spooky E had already burned out all the cells in his brain with his own electricity. Blood poured out of his eyes and nose. Smoke trailed from the wound on his right ear.

He was dead.

***

"………Ah," Orihata Aya moaned, opening her eyes. She thought she had heard faint screaming coming from somewhere.

The world around her was still pitch black. There were no windows or lamps in the room she was imprisoned in.

She was sprawled out on the dust-covered floor, her hands and feet handcuffed from behind. Spooky E had put her here.

She could no longer tell how long she had been sleeping. Despair seemed ready to tear her open.

"Mmph," she twisted herself upright.

Dust flew, and she coughed.

"I have to…I have to get away…"

But it might already be too late. The thought made her teeth chatter violently.

"I have to go…I have to tell him…"

Tormented by anxiety and fear, she moved like an inchworm, looking for the door.

But it wasn't that simple. The door was locked, and there was no other way in or out.

"Augh…!"

She was shivering violently. It was cold, she was exhausted, and she was powerless.

But she kept on moving despite the handcuffs, frantically searching for a way out.

As her body twisted, something fell out of her jacket pocket.

—Her cell phone.

Spooky E had forgotten to take it away from her, but regardless of how brightly the low battery light was shining…there was still hope.

(Aaah…!)

Aya quickly planted her face next to the phone. With this, she could tell him…!

She prayed there would be a signal.

(P-please……!)

Using the tip of her tongue—the only part of her she could move—she tried to push the buttons.

Suddenly, there was a click from the door.

Aya's face jerked.

"……!"

It was no good. She had no time. She couldn't hide the phone in time……!

The handle turned, and the door swung open.

Light poured into the dark room.

But the silhouette standing before her was not Spooky E.

"Wh-who are…?" Aya thought she had seen this tall man in white clothes before.

"We've met before," the man said, agreeing.

"You are—!" she remembered.

The man who had saved them the day she first met Masaki.

"Why are you…?" she murmured, then her head jerked up. "P-please! Help me!"

"I'm sorry, but I can't do that," the man said quietly.

"Eh…?"

"I need you to be a sacrifice," he said, sounding very lonely.

"Wh-what do you…mean?"

"I don't have much time…I didn't expect Spooky E to die. Sooner or later, another Towa Organization agent will come here. I need to be ready for them. I have at least brought 'lightning' to this town."

Aya couldn't understand most of what the man said, except for one thing…

(He's dead…?)

She was sure he'd said that.

The man who had bound her like this, was dead?

Then that means…that means *he* was…

"Um, excuse me…!" Ignoring the man's sinister promise to sacrifice her, Aya tried to ask for the one thing she cared about.

And then the phone in front of her lit up, and began to ring.

"……!"

Aya knew instantly.

Only two people ever called her phone number, and one of them was Spooky E.

The man in white reached out, and picked up the phone.

He answered the phone, and like when the headphones are yanked out of the stereo when you're listening, it got really loud, and a boy's frantic voice filled the room.

"——Orihata! Orihata, is that you?!"

It was Taniguchi Masaki.

(Ahhhhh……)

Relief stole all the strength in Aya's body.

***

"………"

Asukai had heard the voice that came gushing out of the phone before.

(That boy…)

He looked back at Orihata Aya.

She looked completely and utterly relieved.

(She had been about to ask me if the boy was safe.)

He nodded. That was more important to the girl than her own safety.

"Hello…? Hello! Orihata?! Say something, please?!"

"…………"

Asukai listened wordlessly, and at last held the phone out…to Aya's ear.

"…?"

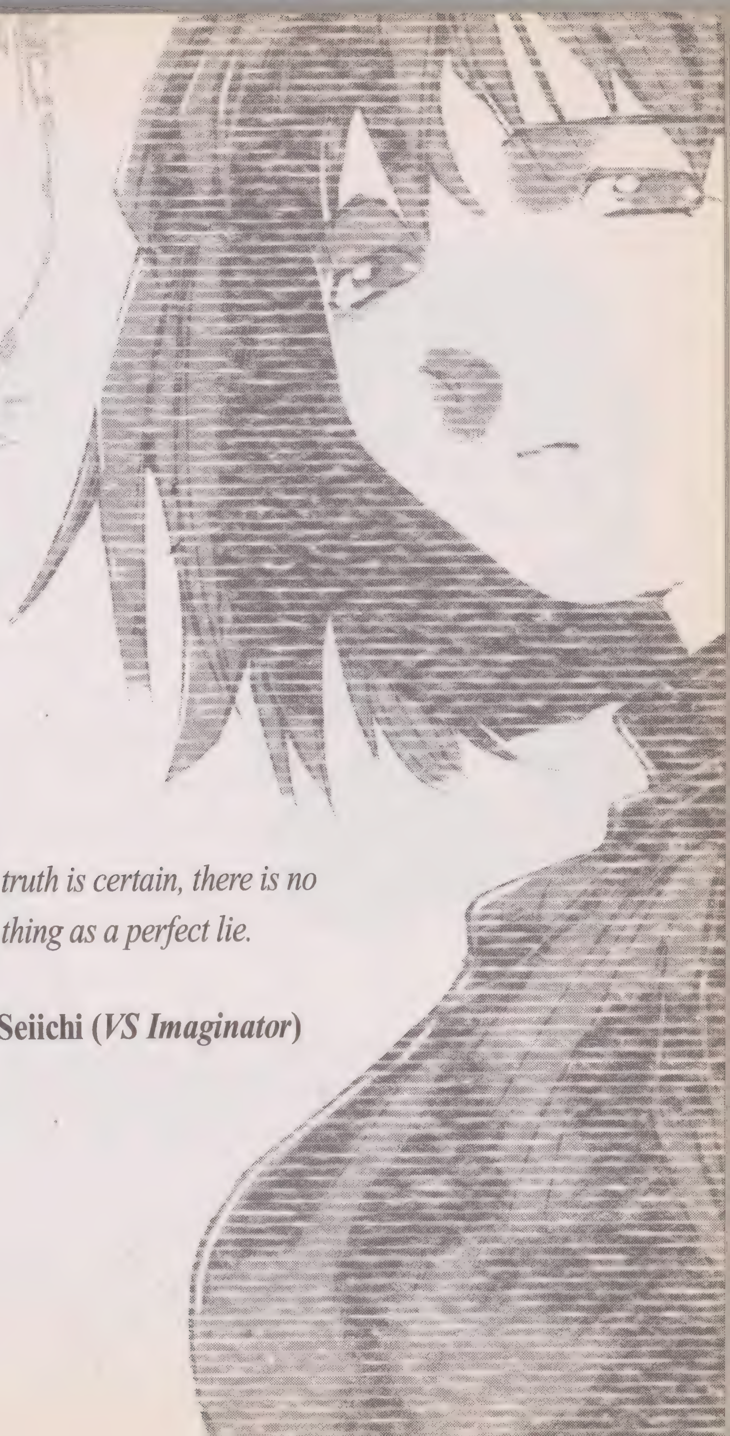
She looked surprised. Whoever this man was, he didn't seem like he planned to forgive her. So why was he giving her the phone?

Asukai gazed down at her coldly. No trace of pity or pride.

"Orihata?! Orihata?!!" the boy's voice continued, nearly shrieking.

Asukai Jin and Orihata Aya looked at each other as the voice between them rang out——

VI



Just as no truth is certain, there is no such thing as a perfect lie.

—Kirima Seiichi (*VS Imaginator*)

Because I'm a complete *idiot*, it took me half the day to sort things out.

I just sat in Orihata's empty apartment, flat on my ass, trying to work out what was bugging me.

(What is it? There's gotta be something…)

When I got hungry, I ate some Calorie Mate I had left in my pocket. I pondered as I ate. But as I thought, I guess I must have dozed off. When my eyes snapped open again, several hours had passed.

"Sh-shit…!"

I looked at my watch, panicking. It was broken. I must have smashed it on something during the fight, or maybe the stun gun my sister hit me with took it out. I had only just noticed.

(When I got to the bus stop, the bus had come right away, so I never even glanced at my watch…)

I looked around the room.

Nope, there were no clocks. No TV or stereo either.

What now? I couldn't just sit here. I had no clues, but just as I stood up to go out and look for her anyway, it finally hit me.

"Oh…"

I was standing in the middle of an empty room.

There was nothing in it.

Nothing at all…

I looked along the walls towards the corners, and that's when I found it.

The phone jack had the lid down. There was nothing hooked up to it.

There was no phone in her apartment…

But I had called her here many, many times. Which means…

"I wasn't actually calling her home phone at all!"

I'm such an idiot.

I bolted out of the apartment and onto the road, looking around frantically.

Nothing.

"Shit!"

I ran and ran, and at last, five hundred meters down the road, I found a pay phone in front of a convenience store.

I grabbed the receiver like how an infant grabs his mother's knee, jammed my phone card into it, and stabbed the phone number I had seared into my memory.

"Come on, pick up…pick up…!"

Orihata's phone was a *cell* phone.

She might still have it with her. Wherever she was, I could call her!

It rang, and rang, and rang.

"Damn it! Pick up…!" I shouted, fretting.

I'm sure it was less than twenty seconds, but it felt more like twenty minutes to me.

At last, there was a click as someone answered.

"Orihata! Orihata, is that you?!" I cried.

There was no response.

"Hello…? Hello!" I could feel my voice rising, getting worked up.

I kept on calling her name.

After what seemed like an eternity of silence, at last I heard a faint voice on the line go, "Ah…" And I knew instantly. It was Orihata's voice. I almost burst into tears. She was safe.

"Hello? Orihata, it's me, Taniguchi Masaki!"

"…Yes, I know," she said, sounding very distant.

"Are you safe, Orihata?"

"Y-yes…n-no. Why do you ask?" she said, awkwardly. It sounded like she had nodded, then corrected herself?

"Kinukawa was arrested by the police…did you hear?"

"Really…?"

"What about you? Are you in any danger?"

"Not really."

"Kinukawa-san was brainwashed apparently, so…"

"—Yes. Please, don't blame her…"

"Is someone there with you? Are they…making you do anything?" I didn't know how to ask this.

"……….."

"I might be out of line saying this, but I want to help you. I want to save you."

Sort of a corny line, but I genuinely meant it.

"……….."

"Orihata, you…I mean, maybe you're just fed up with me by now, but I really don't mind being used. So, just go ahead and use me anytime you want to. I really did like being with you, and that was enough for me…so anything more than that, I…your…"

As I babbled, I could feel my sentences making less and less sense.

I felt like nothing I said was getting through.

No matter what I said, no matter how much I meant it…it was never enough.

"Masaki…" she said, quietly.

"Y-yes?"

"That's enough. I don't need you anymore," she said, bluntly.

I felt a sharp pain in my chest.

"You should find yourself a better…normal girl. You shouldn't see me anymore."

"N-no, that's not…I don't…"

"No. We're finished."

"Uh, Orihata—"

"You know by now? What I've done?"

"I-I—"

"No matter what they told you, it's all true. It never occurred to you that I was like that, did it?"

"Well—"

"I'm sorry. That's what I am. I don't know what you expected from me, but that's all there is."

"But—"

"I lied to you. I betrayed you. Wake up and look around you, Masaki. You're an idiot!"

"But…I'm in love with you!" I shouted, forgetting everything but that truth.

***

"…………….!"

The voice echoing out of the phone momentarily robbed Aya of words.

The pretense she'd barely managed to maintain was crumbling beneath her. Her face flushed, her throat trembled. She couldn't talk.

Her hands were still handcuffed behind her, and someone else was holding the phone for her. She was speaking into the receiver that Asukai Jin was silently holding out for her. Her hands were empty, but covered in sweat. She balled them up, trying to stop them from shaking.

"H-how can you say…" she managed, stifling the quaver in her voice.

She had to.

She couldn't rely on Masaki here.

She couldn't drag him any further into this. She couldn't bear it any longer.

She could never tell him how she felt.

"Where are you, Orihata?"

"N-none of your business!"

She wanted to see him.

One more time, with her own eyes.

But those feelings were her enemy now.

She could only protect Masaki if he hated her. That was the only way.

She remembered what Suema Kazuko had said, on the roof of the school.

"It's impossible to live without someone hating you."

"You're missing the concept of that 'struggle.'"

"And you really need to get that."

Now was that moment.

She had to fight her enemy, had to struggle with her own emotions.

"F-forget about me—leave me alone…!"

But she couldn't say it forcefully.

"Orihata…!" Masaki's voice didn't falter.

Aya couldn't talk anymore. "G-goodbye…" she managed. Tears made her voice sound funny.

"…………"

Asukai Jin watched Aya's suffering with mechanical detachment.

When it became obvious that Aya was not going to speak anymore, he held the phone to his own ear.

"…Is someone else there?" the boy's voice asked, with surprising perception.

Asukai did not reply.

"I know you're listening. I don't know who you are, but you're standing right next to her, aren't you?"

"……….."

"I don't give a shit who you are. You do anything to Orihata, and I guarantee you that I'll be your enemy. And I *will* fight you for her!"

"…………." Asukai looked down at Aya.

She had not heard this last speech. Her head was down, her body quivering—she was crying.

He looked at her, but this did not change Asukai's expression.

"Hey! Are you lis—" and Asukai hung up, cutting the boy off.

A second later, he heard the distinctive roar of an airplane passing through the sky over the Paisley Park construction site.

The noise grew in strength, and was soon easily identifiable.

(Did he hear that…? No, it was still too faint. He won't have recognized it…)

The phone rang again, but Asukai shut the phone off.

He spoke to Aya. "Satisfied?"

"…………."

"You were happy to hear his voice."

She looked up at him.

And, surprisingly—she nodded. "Yes."

She wasn't forcing herself. She honestly meant it.

"Okay. Then your life was not in vain. In that respect, you have the advantage on me," Asukai said, smiling faintly.

***

"…………!"

I looked up.

Nothing. I couldn't see any sign of it.

(No! It's gotta be there! It's gotta be somewhere close!)

With a feeling bordering on faith, I searched the sky. If anyone had seen me, I must have looked like I was searching for UFOs.

At last, I found it.

A black shadow, high up in the air. The sky was gradually darkening, and I could just make out the flashing lights on the tips of the wings.

I took the direction it was flying and thought.

(It's heading this way, so…it must have been over there… which means…)

The more I thought, the uneasier I grew.

I thought I had heard an airplane—I think. I was hardly certain.

And you can hear airplanes over an absurdly large area. Was I going to search it all?

(Like I have any choice…)

The lights of the airplane were getting closer, and now I could pick up the sound.

"——!"

Oh——!

Even when you can see the airplane, you can't necessarily hear it yet. Light travels faster than sound. There's a gap between the moment you see it, and the time the sound actually reaches your ears.

(So that means…it was further away than it was when I found it…)

My imagination sprang into action, making a mental map of the air.

(That means…it came from outside of the city?)

There was nothing but mountains there. Nobody lived out there. It was completely deserted.

(Or wait…I did hear something about an abandoned construction site…)

I felt myself getting excited.

That was it. It had to be!

"That's where she is!"

I started running.

I burst out onto a nearby street, saw that it was deserted, found a motorcycle parked by the side of the road, and crouched down to look at the lock.

The key wasn't in the ignition or anything, but I knew how to get the engine started. You tend to pick up a few tricks when you spend your time living abroad.

Sure, I didn't have a license or anything, but I'd driven one before.

"Sorry. Next time, use a chain!" I muttered to the absent owner, and opened the throttle.

***

"…I was *so* worried about you. Oh well. At least you're safe…" Kinukawa Kotoe's mother said, happily arranging flowers in Kotoe's private hospital room.

Kotoe stared absently at the ceiling.

"………"

It was white, but the slanting rays of the sun gave it a reddish color.

She was still under the supervision of the police. Once she was released, she would have a lot of questions to answer, but her father was in a prominent position in the city, and she was being treated well. It was very easy for people to get permission to visit her like this.

"Is there anything you'd like me to bring, Kotoe?"

"Mom…"

"Yes?"

"What's going to happen to me?" she whispered.

"Don't worry! You have nothing to worry about. Your father said so! He didn't even need to put any pressure on anyone. The police just took care of everything on their own. There's even talk of them actually giving you some sort of award!"

"………" That wasn't what she'd meant, but Kotoe didn't try to explain herself.

"Oh, that reminds me. About Jin-kun…" her mother suddenly said.

Kotoe turned to look. "Jin-niisan? What about him?"

"It sounds like he's suddenly decided to study abroad!"

"Eh…?"

"He came by this morning. He said they can only take so many people, and that he has to leave immediately. He told me to say, 'Hi' to you. That boy is doing so *well*!"

"He's…gone?"

"Yes…he said someone would be round to pick up his things at the apartment later."

"…………"

"You were friends with him, right? You'll miss him?"

"Yeah…" Kotoe nodded, expressionless.

There was a knock at the door.

"Yes?" her mother said, opening it.

There was a policeman in the hall. "Excuse me, but there's someone asking to see her. Is that okay?"

"Someone?"

"Says she's friends with your daughter," the policeman said, turning sideways so they could see the girl standing behind him.

"I'm Suema Kazuko. I spoke with you on the phone, once…"

"Oh, yes, I remember you! I recognize your voice."

"I wanted to speak with Kinukawa-san, if I could…"

"Just a moment," and her mother went back into the room.

"Your friend Suema-san is here," she said.

"Suema-san…?"

"If you're too tired, we can ask her to come back."

"Uh, n-no…I want to see her. Please, let her in. And Mom…?"

"Yes?"

"C-could we have some privacy?"

Her mother was slightly surprised, but agreed pleasantly.

Suema Kazuko came in as her mother left, and closed the door.

"How are you feeling?" she said gently, following the standard progression of the sickbed visit.

"Fine."

"That's good," Suema smiled.

There didn't seem to be anything lurking behind that smile, so Kotoe relaxed a little.

"S-surprised? Didn't think I'd end up like this…" she asked, hesitantly.

"Yes, well. I guess it was a bit unexpected," Suema said, very sweetly. "But not as surprising as it was earlier."

"Earlier?"

"When I heard how everyone's opinion of you had changed."

Kotoe looked down. "I can imagine…"

"They *were* pretty harsh."

"Yeah…"

"'Course, soon as your warrior legend spreads, that ought to change pretty quickly. People's reputations can change just like that," Suema grinned, snapping her fingers.

Kotoe felt like something warm was rising out of her chest. She had been right, she thought. This girl would accept anything.

"Thank you. So, uh, did you come to cheer me up?"

"Nope," Suema shook her head. "I needed to ask you point-blank."

"What?"

"Who or what was controlling you?"

***

I asked Kotoe, as directly as I could.

I knew it was a leap, but I was sure of myself.

Kotoe's eyes widened.

But I didn't flinch. I'm used to people thinking I'm weird.

I stood there, staring at her silently.

After a long pause of nothingness, she asked, "How did you know?"

This was hard to explain, but I had to say something before she would answer.

"Um, how can I put this…humans tend to follow certain patterns. I don't mean stuff like, 'that girl's pretty, so she's stuck-up,' or anything like that. No, I mean everyone has a good and a bad side, get me? They're sensitive to some things and totally clueless about others. We all have a certain balance."

I found this out when I was almost killed. The person that was going to kill me was just an ordinary guy, with an ordinary job—maybe too ordinary. I'd thought a lot about why he had tried to kill me, but I could only come up with one explanation.

He was too ordinary.

That was it. There was no other reason.

I believe that was his balance.

"So your balance, or whatever you want to call it, didn't match up with the way you changed. If you changed, you would change in a different way. Sure, I might be wrong, but…"

But every time I started talking like this, I would start to wonder if it wasn't me that was the strange one.

Despite what I was saying, I didn't believe for a second that because Kotoe was a nice girl she wouldn't do anything strange.

But if she ever did do something strange, it would have been something else. That's all.

"…………"

Kotoe's eyes were still wide open. Guess she hadn't followed my drift. I'm not entirely sure I had myself, so that was probably only natural.

"Putting it a little more bluntly, you're a bit dense and haven't really realized what it means to be pretty and rich, like you are. I'd be surprised if you actually could take that in so quickly."

Even I thought this was a little harsh.

"…!" Kotoe gasped.

"Sorry, it's just…that's what I thought," I said, apologetically.

Kotoe hung her head, but said nothing.

I couldn't think of anything else.

After a long pause, Kotoe at last said, "But…"

"Mm?"

"But I…I don't…remember very well."

"Starting when?"

"You called me once, right? I know I was normal then. A little after that…I don't really know what I was doing anymore," she said slowly, but surely.

I was again impressed by her strength.

I'd been so critical of her, and she had just sat there and took it. It's amazing.

"Right after I called?"

"No…awhile later. You told me not to see Jin-niisan, and I remember being shocked by that…"

"S-sorry. That was…"

"No, forget it. I……right, I went where I always go when I'm depressed, and I remember staring at the sky…wondering silly things like, is it going to snow? That's the last thing I remember. After that, everything's just a strange blur." She looked very sad.

"Where is that?"

"Paisley Park. The amusement park they never finished. There's a tower there, called The Ladder. You know it?"

"Yeah, I do. Your father was part of that?"

"Right. I had a key…I didn't go there because I was rich or anything." There was a note of sadness in her voice.

"S-sorry. Please forget I said that."

"No, I don't mean that…I just thought, I'm so stupid. So childish…" she said. Her head was down. She was trembling. "I can barely remember…but Jin-niisan said goodbye to me."

"…………"

"We won't meet again. I knew that, but…I'm so childish, so stupid—"

Her shoulders quivered with a tiny, shriveled, lonely shiver.

"Kinukawa-san…are you still in love with Asukai Jin?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I don't know. I really don't know…not anymore…but…but…" Her grip tightened on her sheet. Tears began dropping on her fists. "But I want to see him again. I want him to laugh at me, and make fun of me with his, 'Kotoe-chan, you're so shallow.' And then, I want to fight about it…I want him to laugh at me for getting angry…"

After that, she couldn't manage any words.

I came over to her, and gave her a hug.

I brushed her hair quietly.

"Don't worry. I'll do something. I promised, didn't I? I'll do something."

I felt like her loneliness was being transmitted directly to me with each tremble.

***

When I reached the first floor lobby, my friend Miyashita

Touka, who'd come with me, came running over.

"So? How was she?"

"Touka…sorry, but can you go home ahead of me?" I said so harshly it must have sounded rude.

"Why?" she asked, surprised, peering at my face. I didn't have the leeway to worry about her feelings.

"There's somewhere I have to go," I snapped.

"Wh-where?"

"To look for The Ladder."

I couldn't wait here. I had to go there *now*. I knew that much.

I was furious.

I'd only met the man once, but I could have killed him.

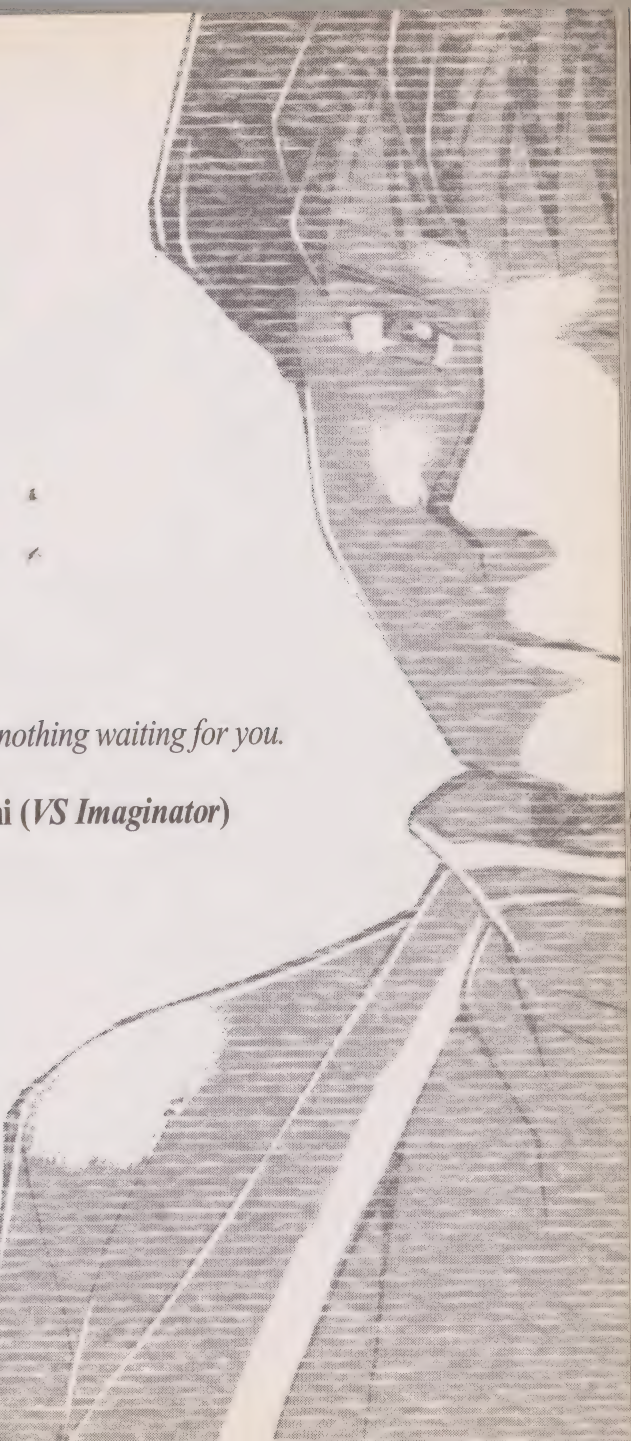
I wanted to tie a rope around Asukai Jin's neck and drag him back down here to apologize to Kinukawa Kotoe…!

"Suema, w-wait—!" Touka's flustered voice called after me as I burst out of the hospital and into the sunset outside.

VII

In the End, there is nothing waiting for you.

—Kirima Seiichi (*VS Imaginator*)



"——Just a little longer," the girl standing behind Asukai Jin said.

Her body was transparent, and few people could actually see her. Even Asukai, who had originally been able to see her quite well, could almost never make her out these days.

"——Just a little longer."

The girl's feet were floating just above the ground.

No matter where she was, wherever people could stand, her feet would be a few centimeters up in the air.

But she had almost reached touchdown.

"I can almost get through."

No one could hear her voice.

Or perhaps she never intended it to be heard.

"——Mm?"

As Asukai Jin took Orihata Aya up the stairs of The Ladder, he thought he could almost hear a voice he had not heard for awhile.

He stopped and turned his head, but there was nothing there.

“………?

Her hands still handcuffed, Orihata Aya looked up at him, confused. “Are you going to kill me here…?” As always, her manner of speaking was extremely distant.

“N-no…not yet,” Asukai shook his head, and began pushing her ahead of him again.

He was already beginning to think that the spectral girl had been nothing but an illusion. His own unconscious had produced a delusional ‘counselor’ to help him make full use of his ability.

The moment he had begun moving of his own accord, he had almost entirely ceased to see her.

In retrospect, the key phrase, “Snow Falls in April,” was one he’d heard from students before. Some common fragment of the female students’ unconsciousness had been giving him remarkably similar dreams, and he had allowed them to influence him.

So he had no one to help him with what he was about to do.

He had to find his own resolve, and become the Imaginator. He nodded to himself. He already had.

“Technically, I’m not going to kill you,” he said, in a low voice. “I’m just going to tear away your heart. You will no longer be yourself, but rather something not even worth calling human.”

“…………” This sinister declaration failed to have any effect on Aya’s expression. “Human…” she said under her breath.

“Mm?” Asukai didn’t hear her. “What did you say?”

"………" She didn't answer.

Asukai grunted in irritation, but didn't ask again.

What Aya had almost said was, 'Human? I was never…'

"We have a little more time. It's still early in the evening. People are out and about. This may cause quite a panic, so we'll wait until most people have settled down. Till the middle of the night," Asukai explained. "I should have some time before the Towa Organization notices that Spooky E has failed to report in, and sends someone to take care of the other systems they have placed throughout the area."

"………" Aya wondered if she even factored into those plans.

"The seed I'll make from your heart will only be strong enough to influence the people in this town. But that's enough. As long we can tell *them* from whatever the Towa Organization sends. As for the next seed, well, I'm sure a suitable candidate will emerge from the people I've planted yours on."

"How strong…an influence?" Aya asked quietly.

"Not that much. None of them would even notice. Their pain will just abruptly vanish."

"Oh…"

That was fine.

Then Masaki would be able to forget her.

They reached the roof of The Ladder.

The place Spooky E had chosen as the perfect spot to disperse his 'disinfectant' commanded a panoramic view of the city and of the people's lives within it.

The sky was darkening rapidly.

When that light had completely vanished, Aya thought, looking up at the sky, she would no longer have a meaningful existence.

"Man, it's a beautiful night!"

She thought she heard Masaki's voice echoing in her ear. He had said that shortly after they met, back when they were out walking together.

She smiled faintly at the memory. That was enough, she thought.

"………"

Asukai Jin looked down at her wordlessly.

This stability, even when facing her own end, was exactly what he needed.

The phone in his breast pocket rang.

"What?" he answered. Only his followers knew this number.

"Someone's approaching."

"Who?"

"Him again—the boy playing 'Boogiepop.'"

"Okay…" Asukai frowned. 'So he did come,' he thought. But his voice never lost its quiet. "Deal with him as planned."

The person replied, "Roger," and hung up.

Aya had not heard their conversation. She had not even appeared interested, as if nothing was worth paying attention to ever again.

'If I told her…' Asukai thought, staring at her fragile profile. 'If I told her, what would she do?'

For a moment, he was tempted to find out.

But of course, he said nothing. He just toyed with the notion in the back of his mind.

***

The motorcycle ran out of gas partway up the mountain.

"Shit—!" I swore, and dumped the bike. I climbed the rest of the way on foot.

There was no green anywhere on the mountain. It had been completely cleared, and parts of it were already paved with asphalt.

A big sign that read, "Paisley Park Construction Site" came into view, and behind it, I could see several towers and other constructions, glowing eerily in the light of the setting sun.

It was surrounded by heavy-duty fences.

They looked hard to climb. Too tall, and made of smooth vertical poles, leaving no footholds.

"Shit, shit, shit!" I fretted, walking along the fence, looking for an opening.

I had hoped that shaking the fence would dislodge it or knock it over, but it wouldn't budge, even though it must have been here for years.

I lost my temper again. "Damn it!" I yelled, kicking the fence.

And about ten meters away, I heard a creak.

I snapped my head towards the sound, and found a section of the fence slowly opening—an emergency exit of some kind.

(Did the latch break when I kicked it?)

I darted towards it…

But I heard a faint rustle, and skidded to a stop.

What was it?

"…………"

I moved forward again, slowly…carefully.

The sound kept going, like whatever it was was increasing.

I gritted my teeth.

The door had been opened deliberately. They were waving me in.

Common sense told me to retreat.

But if I had had any of that, I never would have come here in the first place. The fact that someone was waiting for me was, really, proof that I had guessed correctly. Orihata was here.

So I had to go in.

"__________"

I felt briefly like I was missing something. Which embarrassed me.

Because I was missing my outfit.

When I was wearing it, it was much easier to take on something unnatural, like I was now. It was easier to concentrate, kind of like I was hypnotizing myself into bravery.

But it was gone now.

I had to do this by my own force of will.

"Let's do this," I said softly, and slipped through the fence into Paisley Park.

The half-finished, skeletal buildings cast complicated and sinister line patterns across the ground in the near horizontal rays of the setting sun.

Just walking on those patterns made me feel drunk.

I hadn't noticed on the motorcycle or while I was rushing forward, but the wind had gotten really strong.

"—Orihata!" I shouted, but the wind stole my voice, and it went nowhere.

I was gonna have to check every one of these buildings.

I started walking.

Behind me, a footstep crunched the sand that lay piled on the asphalt.

Scrunch, scrunch—more than one. Several.

"…………" Ready for anything, I turned around.

And was completely surprised.

"Wh-what?!!" I blurted. The five figures behind me were…

——A bear.

——A panda.

——A penguin.

——A cat.

——A dinosaur.

Obviously, all costumes.

And they were coming towards me.

"Wh-what the hell?!" I shouted, confused. A second later, they all lunged at me, so I had to hurriedly dodge.

"——!" They may have been dressed like a joke, but their movements were completely serious.

Their kicks and punches were extremely accurate.

"Unh…rah!" Moving backwards, I kicked the penguin in the stomach.

But the costume cushioned the blow, absorbing the impact.

But it also twisted my foot…

'Uh oh,' I thought.

They weren't dressed up like this to mess with me. It was for protection! And just as I had with my own outfit, they were also using theirs to remain focused. They had probably found them stored somewhere in the park. The stranger you look, the easier it is to do something crazy.

(So, the people inside these things are…normal?!)

Who was attacking me?

I tripped the bear, and tried to run away to give myself time to figure things out. I figured the costumes would be hard to run in.

I figured wrong.

My passage was blocked by a group of clowns.

"G-gimme me a break…!"

I understood the logic behind it, but it was still bad for my heart.

I changed direction, and dashed off again.

But again and again, wave after wave, people in bizarre costumes and clothing, with their faces painted purple, or yellow, or some other weird ass color, just kept coming at me.

"Augh! Get away!"

I scrambled to avoid them.

"Nothing to be afraid of, Boogiepop-kun," one of them—too many to tell which—said.

"Nothing to be afraid of."

"Don't be scared!"

The others joined in, like a relay race, or a game of telephone.

"St-stay away!" I shouted, finding myself surrounded.

"There's no reason to be frightened, Boogiepop-kun——" they said, the same thing, over and over.

"You'll understand soon——"

No matter how many I punched or kicked, they kept on coming. It was as if they'd never heard of using caution.

"St-stop this—!" I shouted, trying to punch a new guy in the face, but he just grinned at me.

"——!"

The face under the makeup was that of a girl's. Young, probably high school.

Thrown completely, I stopped moving.

Seizing the chance, several others piled on me from behind.

"Sh-shit! Let go!!"

I slammed my elbow into them, but they were the guys in costumes, and my blows had no effect.

"Don't be afraid——"

"It'll be over soon——"

Each of my limbs was pinned down by at least three people, and I was completely unable to move.

"D-damn it!"

As I struggled, a male clown brought something towards me.

A needle.

Some sort of drug inside it.

"………!" I gulped.

"Don't worry, Boogiepop-kun. When you wake up, you'll be one of us——" he said, as he stuck the needle in my arm.

"N-noooo!" I screamed. But the clown's fingers pushed the end of the needle relentlessly, injecting the liquid inside into my veins.

(O-orihata——!)

Filled with rage and despair, the world grew dim before my eyes.

There was a sudden pain in my arm.

I swung my gaze that way, and the needle, still stuck in my arm, was broken in two.

The clown was staring at his empty hands in surprise.

Half the needle was still stuck in me—but the other half was floating in the air above my chest.

"——Eh?"

The needle suddenly leapt away, like something was pulling on it.

I looked in that direction——

And the needle fell to the ground in front of a shadowy figure.

Before I even realized what it was, I thought, '——Oh, I get it. He must've yanked the needle out with some sort of micro-filament wire, and that's what caused it to break and go flying towards him.'

Why was I suddenly able to make such a calm analysis? My only explanation is that my brain was in such a state of panic that it couldn't figure out what else to think about.

Why? Because the shadowy figure——

Standing there, looking more like a pipe than a person, as if it had risen directly out of the dark ground, was a figure I knew all too well. Too well, in fact, as now I had no earthly idea of what was happening.

Did I know it?

How could I not?

After all the time I'd spent——

"Wh-who are you?" the clown screamed.

The figure in the black cloak answered quietly, "You already know who I am."

From the voice, it was impossible to tell if it was a man or a woman.

He reached his hand out from under the cloak. There was a stopwatch in it. Glancing down at it, the cloaked figure said, "3, 2, 1——" then waved his hand.

And a horrifically loud noise rocked Paisley Park.

It was——

***

I, Suema Kazuko, was riding up the mountain road in the evening on the scooter my parents had bought for me.

At first, they had been opposed to me even getting a license, but once I started going to cram school and coming home so late, I was able to easily convince them it was much safer at night if I was driving something. It's at moments like this that you realize just how strangely useful it is to have such a horrible thing happen to you in the past.

Of course, my real goal was to broaden the area I could move in. I wanted to see and know all kinds of things, and this feeling was driving me onwards.

"——Um?"

I stopped for a moment. There was a motorcycle abandoned by the side of the road.

I put my hand on it, and felt the engine was still warm.

It looked like it had just run out of gas and been abandoned. And the way it was lying on its side suggested that the driver had been in quite a hurry.

"Something's definitely going on," I said, swallowing.

Just as I got back on my scooter to drive on, I heard music from up ahead.

"………?" I listened closely.

I'd heard the music somewhere before. I don't know a lot about music, but this music was famous enough that even I'd heard it. It had been used in some kind of commercial or something.

"Was it Wagner…?"

***

"*Die Meistersinger von Nümberg*?!" Asukai Jin gaped as the flamyboyant music roared all around him.

It was playing on every speaker they'd installed in the half-finished park.

There should have been no power, but the music thundered onwards anyway.

"What's going on?!"

Asukai dialed his phone, trying to figure out what was going on.

But nobody answered.

Presumably the electricity had been left connected, the breakers shut off. But someone had clearly flipped the breakers back on again.

There should have been watchmen posted throughout the park. Yet——

"——?"

Orihata Aya blinked her eyes at the bizarrely lively flood of sound.

The composer was known for extremely long, tempestuous music, and one of his loudest and most flamboyant pieces seemed to be trying to bring this dying park back to life.

***

The image in front of me wobbled.

The needle. A quarter of the contents had entered my bloodstream. Presumably, it was an anesthetic.

(Unh……)

The scenery seemed to be swaying.

Events unfolded around me like an illusion.

The clowns rushed at the cloaked figure——

Who waved a hand, and with that, all the clowns started falling over——

And as they fell over, they slid across the ground, moving into one big pile, freezing into place like some sort of mosh pit.

Like magic——

The cloaked figure started moving.

The guy in the dinosaur costume leapt toward him.

The cloaked figure moved his hand again, not even touching the dinosaur, but knocking him over all the same.

——There was a trick to it.

He was using thread. An extremely strong, extremely thin wire.

I knew this, but…but he was barely moving, standing bolt upright, yet the way he was grabbing their legs, knocking them over, and tying them up despite their huge advantage in numbers could only be viewed as the work of a magician.

No, not a magician.

A *shinigami*——

Unlike me, he wasn't bothered by the gender of his opponents. He never held back.

And that music roared around him like madness itself.

The people holding me down, seeing their companions being mowed down, jumped up. But they were met with the same fate.

The cloaked figure stopped in front of me.

"So now we meet," he said, making a strange, asymmetrical expression. Was he smiling? Was he mocking me? "I didn't plan to come out, but if I didn't settle things quickly, a certain nosy someone was going to get herself mixed up in it."

"………" I couldn't answer.

A few more clowns and a lion attacked, but the cloaked figure dispensed with them without even swaying.

He was moving with the melody and rhythm of the music, like a conductor.

"Music is extremely effective in stirring people's emotions. Much like makeup. But music can create a response in a great number of people simultaneously. It rattles them, robs them of their rational judgment," he explained quietly, like a clergyman.

I could do nothing but stare back at him, reacting exactly as he spoke.

The drugs kept me from standing. But even so, I was so befuddled I would have toppled over of my own accord.

"Th-this is…" I could hear my own teeth chattering. "This is what I…pretended to be?"

Talk about completely out of my league; talk about nerve.

"Oh, that wasn't your fault," the 'real' one nodded. "You'd been brainwashed."

He said it so easily that I couldn't grasp his meaning for a moment.

"I'd what—?"

"There should be at least one moment during your activities with Orihata Aya where your memories become indistinct. That is when Spooky E paralyzed your 'fear,'" he said, as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

"…………!"

Leaving me stunned, the 'real' one moved past me, heading back into the fray.

A moment later, everyone who had attacked him was lying on the ground, no longer moving. They were all unconscious.

The 'real' one came back to me. Not even out of breath. He really…didn't seem human.

"You should probably take that needle out. You can move that much, right?" he said.

I noticed that half the needle was still jammed into my arm.

But the hell with *that*.

"What do you *mean*?"

"Mm?"

"Brainwashed? How?"

The 'real' one shrugged beneath the cloak. "The usual fashion."

"But that's—!"

"You know I'm right," he said, calmly.

That was true.

But—

"But…then…then…I…"

I wasn't acting of my own free will?

My feelings were lies?

"I…thought I was in love with Orihata…was that a lie as well…?" I was stunned, my mind completely blank.

The music thundered on around me.

"What have you ever thought about?" he suddenly asked.

I raised my head, dazed.

He was wavering right and left, probably because of the drugs.

"Have you ever done anything that you are totally sure was of your own free will?"

"…………"

"Adapting yourself to society is essentially being brainwashed to match societal requirements. The only difference from your situation is that the source of it is not clearly defined. There are no humans who have not been brainwashed."

"……………"

"Now the problem: within that context—within your brainwashed, restrained psyche—what do you value the most? Bound tightly by the world, what do you still desire?"

"……………"

(I'm…)

(I want…)

The music grew even louder——

***

——And then it stopped.

(Wh-what was it…?)

Asukai Jin had a pair of binoculars out, and was scanning the park below from atop The Ladder.

It was almost dark, so he could barely see—but he found several people lying on the ground.

"What…?!"

That 'Boogiepop' could not be *this* good, surely?

Then…he was coming *here*.

"What's happening?" Orihata Aya asked. She was tied to a pillar in the center of the roof.

"We can't waste anymore time," Asukai said, his back to her. "I have to deal with you right away."

Even now, Aya's expression failed to change.

"Oh…then get it over with," she said, peacefully.

"Okay—" and Asukai turned to head over to her. Suddenly, he stopped in his tracks. "———!"

He was too late.

There was a shadow standing directly behind Orihata Aya.

But…something was strange.

The shadow was shorter than Taniguchi Masaki.

"Who are you…?!" Asukai cried.

Aya turned to look behind her.

Her face stiffened. "N-no……!"

The shadow looked like it had risen directly out of the darkness. Its mouth opened. "Don't be so surprised, Camille-kun. You've been looking for me, haven't you?"

"——————"

"Wh-what?" Asukai looked at Aya, and realized that this figure was hardly her ally. "Th-then who *are* you?"

"You already know who I am," the shadow said quietly.

Asukai's head was spinning.

What in the name of god was going on? He couldn't get a grip on anything.

But…after all he'd done, he wasn't about to let anyone stop him.

"——Right!" Asukai whipped out the gun he had hidden in his pocket, the one he'd stolen from Kinukawa Kotoe.

He fired without hesitation.

The shadowy figure dodged it with ease.

But by this time, Asukai had raced to Aya's side. "St-stay still, and I won't have to kill you!" Asukai said, one hand around Aya, the other aimed at the shadow.

"Quite the philanthropist, Imaginator," the shadow said.

Asukai frowned. "If you know that name—!"

"Then what? You won't let me live?"

"…………"

"That's unimportant. Go ahead, do what you're going to do," the shadow said unexpectedly.

"What?"

"I mean it. Do whatever you like, see if I care."

"……………?"

"If you even can," the shadow said, with a trace of derision.

Asukai glanced sideways at Aya.

Her face was white with fear. She clearly viewed the shadow as an enemy.

(What the hell is he…?!)

He'd never seen anyone like this—even worse:

(Th-there's no 'vision' at his chest…!)

This being was beyond the scope of Asukai's power.

(I've never seen him…I've never seen him before…so why? Why do I feel like I already know him?)

It was like he'd met something similar before…but how could he?

"What? Why hesitate now?" The shadow nagged. "Go on, get a move on."

It was as if he was looking forward to some great joke…but underneath, fundamentally not laughing at all.

"Argh…" Asukai turned his gaze to Aya.

She shook off her fear, and looked back at him.

Then closed her eyes. "Eep!"

Asukai reached for the flower on her chest.

But his hand passed right through it.

"————?"

He tried again, not believing his eyes.

But again, his hand passed right through the vision, unable to grab hold of anything.

"Wh-what? Why?" Asukai panicked.

He had done this so many times, so easily, but he couldn't do it with hers…!

"Why can't I touch it?!" he exclaimed.

Aya opened her eyes.

Her expression was tinged with loneliness.

"…I thought this might happen," she said, softly.

"What? What do you mean?"

"You wanted to do something to humans, right? That's why you needed me—but that won't work."

"Why not?!"

"Because I'm not human," she said, her voice filled with deep resignation.

"…………!" Asukai's face twitched.

The shadow spoke. "See? Either way, you had already lost." It moved towards him.

"Ah…" Asukai staggered back, away from Aya. "H-how can…that be?"

"The moment you first met this girl, your loss was already decided. I may not be Sun Tzu, but clearly, 'Everything is already decided before the battle even begins.'"

"B-but this is…"

"You and this girl—whatever brought you together, whatever inexplicable, ironic twist of fate that was, I do not know, but you had already lost to it," the shadow delcared, his voice as cold as ice.

Asukai tried to remember when and how he had met Orihata Aya—but he couldn't.

"Th-that's just…"

He reeled backwards.

The shadow followed. It passed in front of Orihata Aya, chasing the retreating Asukai.

"If you only look to the future, things like this happen…Imaginator! If you believe yourself to be the only possibility, then some other possibility will arise when you least expect it, and sweep your feet out from under you."

But the shadow's eyes were not looking at Asukai Jin, but at something behind him.

"Aaaaah…!" Scrambling backwards, Asukai felt his back come up against something hard.

Seven canisters with a sinister gleam.

"……!" Asukai's eyes widened.

He reached a hand towards the valve. "In that case…" he screamed, and tried to release the vial of death contained within…

But his hand would not do it.

"Ah!"

It was shaking like a leaf.

He couldn't do it.

"It's impossible, Imaginator," the shadow said, quietly. "Completely impossible. *He* can never break through."

Whoever the shadow was talking to, his voice sounded, for the first time, a little sad.

"All you can do is fall. No other possibility remains before you."

"Ah…"

"Even if snow does fall in April, Imaginator, it will only melt in the warmth of spring. It will never accumulate."

"Aaaahh…" Asukai's feet buckled under him.

A huge gust of wind swept across the rooftop.

"——!"

The wind was so strong, even Aya, tied to a pillar, had to fight against it.

The shadow was unaffected, but Asukai was knocked clean off his feet.

He rolled, headed towards the tower's edge——

"Ah…!" His expression was completely vacant…

As if he had given up on everything.

The tower was incomplete, and there was no fence for safety. Even as he tumbled over the edge, Asukai reached his hands towards thin air. Even he had no idea who he was reaching for——

"__________"

He opened his mouth, but no words came out. A great emptiness opened beneath him.

***

Wire glinted.

Several strands hurtled through the air, wrapping around the falling object before it was even out of sight.

They took the object's weight and stopped it. It hung suspended in the air…

Unmoving.

"And…"

The cloaked figure, which had hurled the wires, tied them to a nearby pipe. That was all—it made no move to lift him.

"…………"

Aya's eyes widened. "Wh-what did you do?"

"Mm?"

"Did he…die? Did you kill him?"

"Oh, let's see…well, he may have a little whiplash."

"Why did you save him?"

"He was not worth killing," the cloaked figure said.

"…………" Aya was astonished. She couldn't think of what else to say.

"Without the Imaginator, how much power does he really have? He has simply returned to his former self. He is no longer my enemy."

"…………"

Aya caught her breath.

The cloaked figure's enemy…

"So…" Aya said, voice trembling. "So you…would not hold back, if there was a clear enemy?"

"Exactly." The cloaked figure briefly put his hand inside the cloak.

When it emerged again, it held a knife.

Aya gulped.

The cloaked figure came towards her.

This time, Aya didn't close her eyes. She couldn't close them.

The figure's eyes were staring directly into hers, pinning her in place. She couldn't even think…

He stood before her now.

And swung the knife.

"…………!"

Aya saw the blade catch the last rays of light from the setting sun.

"Ah………!" she almost screamed…but the sound was drowned out by the snapping sound a moment later.

The knife had sliced through both the chain on her handcuffs and the rope tying her to the pillar.

"——Eh?"

Ignoring Aya's confusion, the cloaked figure looked towards the seven canisters.

"I guess I can leave those. In the next couple of days, the Towa Organization is sure to be by to pick them up. Best to leave it to the experts," he said, innocently.

"Wh-why?" Aya asked, looking at her newly freed hands, then at the cloaked figure.

"Mm?"

"A-aren't I your enemy? Why did you help me?"

"How are you my enemy?"

"B-but…I…I'm not human, and…"

"Yes, you mentioned that. But that has nothing to do with anything," the cloaked figure said, decisively.

"Nothing?"

"The reason Asukai Jin was unable to harm you has nothing to do with your physical nature. After all, he had already defeated Spooky E. His corpse is over there. If it came down to physicality, that monster would have posed a far greater problem than you."

"B-but…"

"Asukai Jin seems to have fatally misunderstood his own ability. I do not know exactly what that power was, but it seems to have been something to do with seeing people's hearts. However, the human heart is not complete in and of itself, and it is not so easily understood. The heart is purely a product of communication with others, and is not to be mistaken for the true self, the ego. Asukai Jin failed to grasp this. No matter how much you change a person's heart, it will only be fleeting, and eventually, it will return to its original form."

".............."

"So from the start, I was ignoring Asukai Jin himself. No matter how much he poked at people's hearts, it would never amount to anything significant. Even if he had taken your heart from you, you would have recovered. You see, you have something protecting you from deep within."

"Eh...?"

"And because of that, a one-sided power like Asukai Jin's was unable to affect you."

Aya put her hands to her chest.

She felt like something very warm was resting there.

When she thought about it, it gave her courage. She knew it was there.

But——

"But aren't the Towa Organization your enemies? I—"

"The Towa Organization itself is not my enemy. Though, I have no idea what their opinion on the matter might be, from my point of view, sometimes their agents simply trigger my sensors."

Beneath his cape, he shrugged.

"..........." Aya could think of no other arguments. This was beyond her understanding.

“If you have nowhere to go, there is a very strange girl called the Fire Witch near you. Talk to her. I’m sure she can help. She’s a lot more sympathetic than I am.”

Aya looked up. “B-but…” There was one more thing she had to ask. One final question. “If you were ignoring him…then why did you come here? Why did you save me?”

“Oh,” the cloaked figure made a strange, asymmetrical expression, kind of like a smile, but more like a sneer. “That *is* a long story. I’ll say just this—it was not my idea to save you. Someone asked me to.”

“Wh-who…?”

The cloaked figure looked astonished. “Do you really not know?”

“Eh——?” There was another gust of wind.

Aya hurriedly grabbed onto the pillar.

When she looked up again, she was alone on the roof.

Alone with the wind.

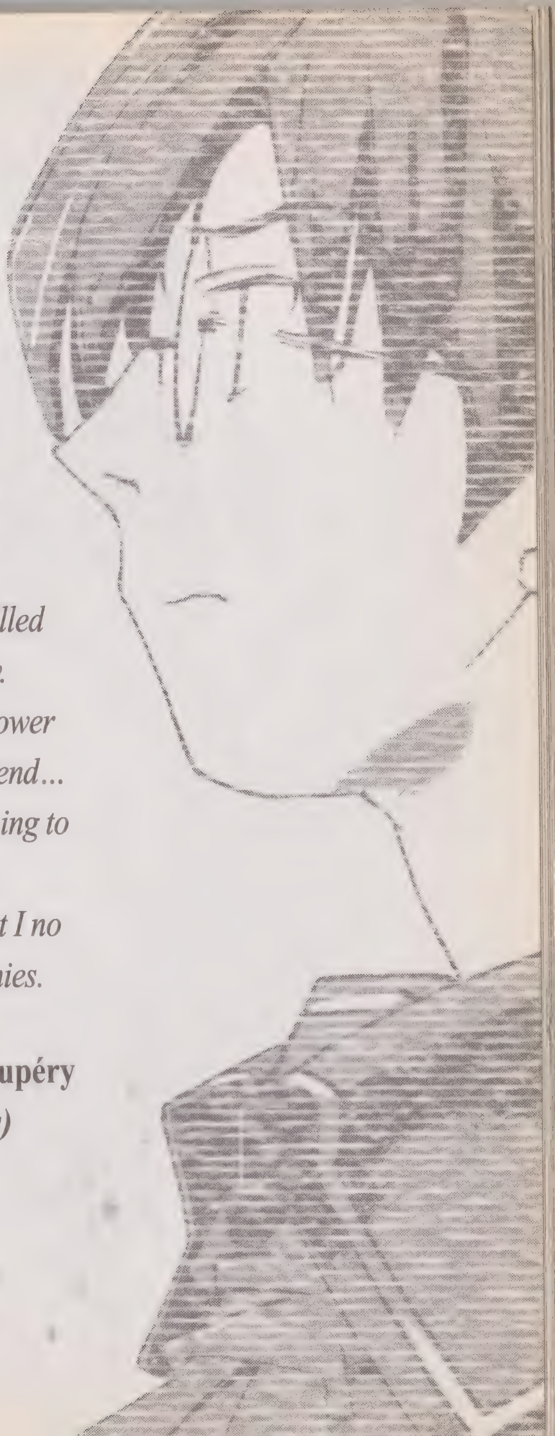
***

“Unhh! God…god damn it!!” I groaned, dragging my paralyzed body through Paisley Park. I couldn’t even stand. My head was reeling. It was all I could do to stay conscious.

The ‘real’ one had abandoned me and gone off somewhere. I gritted my teeth in desperation.

“Shit…shit!”

VIII



To my eyes, you are filled
with gentle nobility.
I see a king with the power
to grant water, or a friend...
Or even an enemy, coming to
me through you.
Yet at times I know that I no
longer have any enemies.

—Antoine De Saint-Exupéry
(Terre des Hommes)

"Oh…my…god——!" I gaped around me. By the time my scooter reached Paisley Park, the situation was beyond words.

People were lying on the ground everywhere, all of them in costumes or clown makeup—all unconscious and tied up.

I know a lot about weird things, and maybe everyone says to 'talk to Suema Kazuko' if something queer is going on, but even I had never read about anything as strange as this.

What in hell's name happened here?

"Uh…umm…" I said, gingerly picking my way forward, following the path of fallen bodies in the hopes of tracking down the source.

"But…could this really be…?"

It was quiet all around me.

Certainly something strange had happened here…but could it already be finished?

Again?

Yet another mess goes down right next to me, and passes me by?

"Why does this always happen to me?" I muttered, really meaning it.

I went a little further in, and found someone still awake.

"Unh," he groaned.

I ran over to him. He wasn't tied up.

"A-are you okay?"

It was a boy. I hesitated for a second, but then helped him sit up.

And was surprised again.

I knew him.

"Y-you're…Taniguchi-kun?!

He was the younger brother of this girl I know.

"Oh…Suema-san," he said, eyes not really managing to focus on me.

"What's going on? Taniguchi-kun, what happened here?" I asked. I was getting a little frustrated, so I shook him.

"P-please, I need your help. There's a girl here somewhere… help her…" he said, his words slurring.

"Taniguchi-kun?! Hey!!"

"Please…"

His head lolled, and he was asleep. I slapped him and shook him, but he didn't even bat an eye. He was totally under.

"Come *on*!!!" I shouted.

I knew the world wasn't ever fair…but everything around me was pure chaos.

Something had happened; that much was certain.

Taniguchi-kun had asked me to save a girl.

If this were a fairy tale, then he was the prince. It was his job to save the princess and get his kiss.

So, why did he have to leave that up to me?

Why had he fallen asleep?

What was up with all the crazy-looking people in makeup?

Would anyone ever explain any of this stuff to me?

Just what was my role in all of this?

I remembered back to one of Kirima Seiichi's books……

"The problem lies with your own frailty of resolve that forces simple, easy to understand answers and resolutions on others. This is the main reason the Imaginator is overrunning the world. No matter how long you wait, nothing ever begins."

When I read that, I thought I understood, but now that I found myself in this very situation, I desperately wanted a simple, easy to understand explanation and a happy ending. I really——

I sighed, took off my coat, and covered Taniguchi-kun with it.

I wiped the sweat off his forehead, and checked to see if he had a fever. It looked like it was safe to leave him alone.

"But, a girl? Which girl? Who is she, Taniguchi-kun…?" I asked myself.

Suddenly, a strange voice spoke to me. "That girl is at the top of The Ladder—the tall tower to your left."

I couldn't tell if the voice belonged to a boy or a girl.

"Wh-who's there?"

"You must go to The Ladder, and find the girl, Orihata Aya.

Bring her to this boy. The man you are looking for, Asukai Jin, is hanging from the roof."

"Wh-what?!" I looked around, but I couldn't figure out where the voice was coming from.

And Orihata Aya? I was sure I'd heard that name before.

"Do you know what happened here?"

"Nothing of consequence."

"I'll make up my own mind!" I roared. "I need to know why something this screwed up can happen! What should I do with all the people lying here?"

"Nothing. Soon they will be leading ordinary, tedious lives again. The lives that let the Imaginator hook them…"

"Eh?"

"Forget about them. When they wake, they will know their only choice is to return to the world they left."

I couldn't understand this. My head swam. But even so—why? I felt a strange familiarity with this voice. Even though it should have been the first time I'd ever heard it…

"Your earnest strength is an admirable thing, but beware of causing worry for those around you."

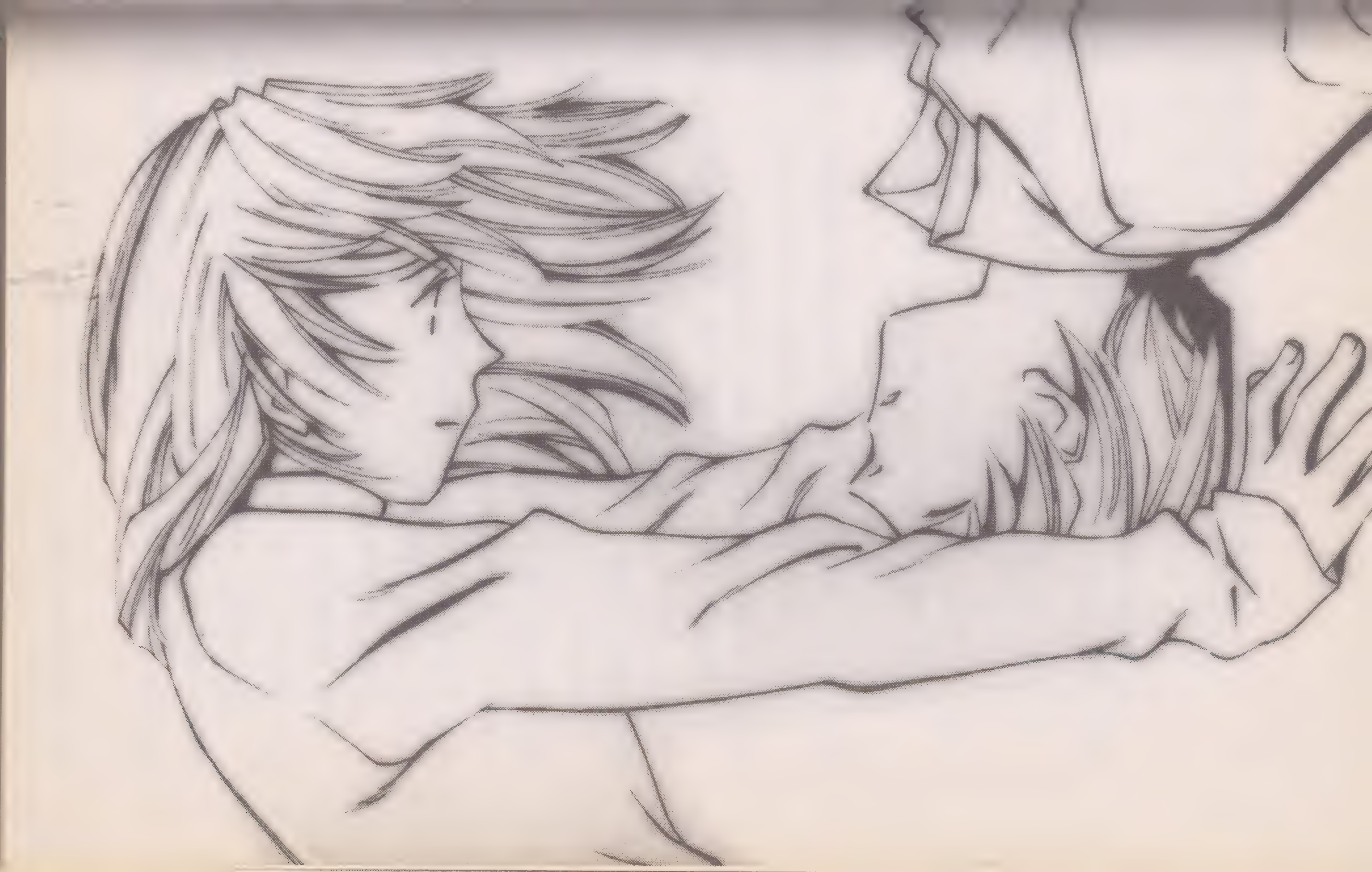
"Wh-who are you?!" I yelled.

From the darkness came a strange feeling, part mocking, part feigned innocence. "You already know who I am."

Then the feeling melted away, leaving me alone.

VS Imaginator Part II – "PARADE" closed.

Epilogue



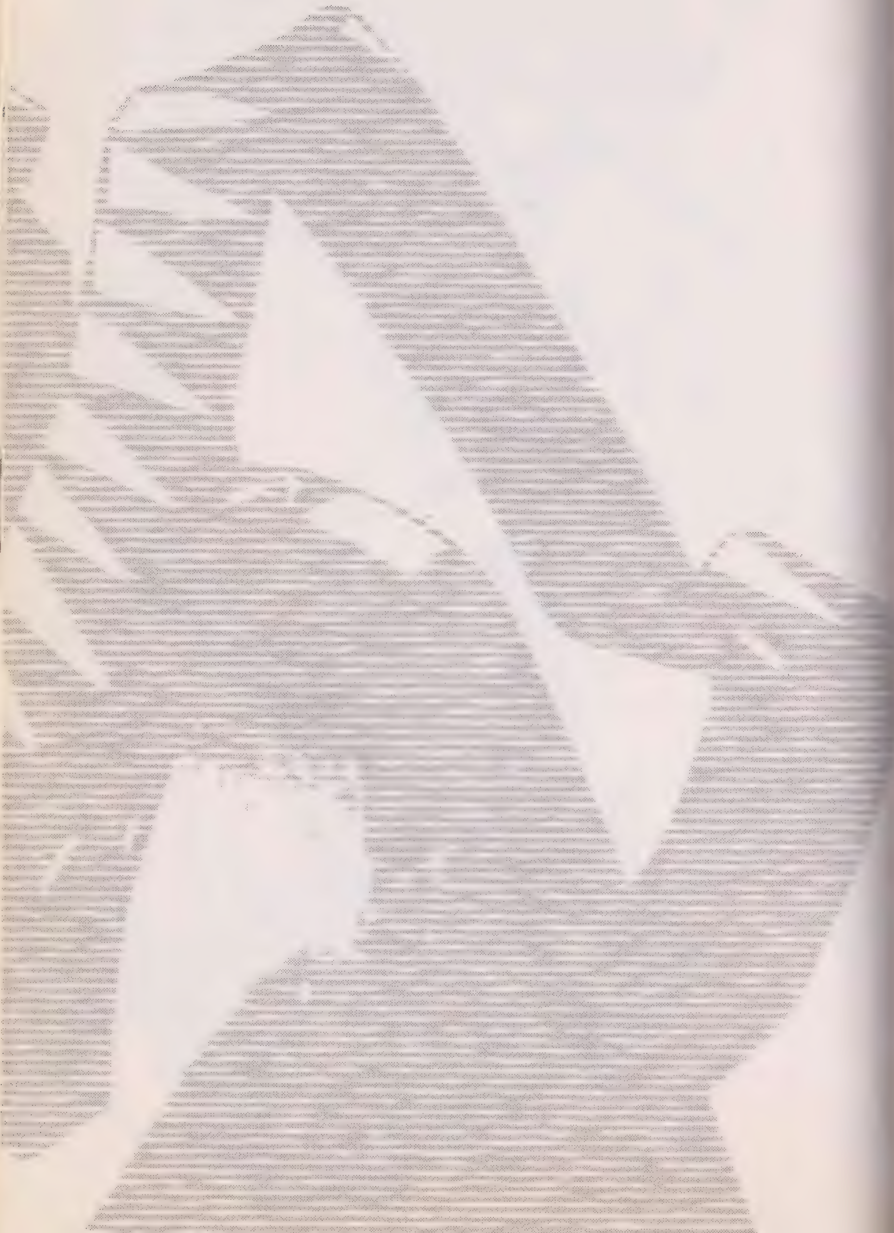
A girl entered the tower that rose out of the darkness. She pulled up the man suspended over the tower's edge, swaying dangerously. A few minutes later, a different girl emerged from the tower.

She moved along the path at a near run to where a boy lay sleeping.

Kneeling down by his side, she stroked his cheek lovingly.

"Unh…unhhh…" the boy moaned.

A smile of purest joy rose on her face, and she waited quietly for him to wake.



Afterword

(I'm blathering, so please don't take this *too* seriously.)

There's an old expression, "Pretty things are dirty; Dirty things are pretty." (Really.) When I first heard or read the phrase, I thought, "That's so true," without any actual basis for it. This might be a little challenging for normal people to grasp, but it just might be that the most unforgivable thing is something that really we should all be forgiving, and the most wonderful, widely accepted thing is something we should all be denying. I mean, sometimes I just sit around thinking about stuff like this. If hatred is a kind of love, a phrase often spouted on awful melodramas, then is not love a form of hate? etc. Just a thought, don't really have anything to support the idea.

So I'm a pretty big fan of music, but when people ask me what kind of music I like, I always end up going, "Umm…" because I just like so many different kinds. Yet when I was in school, I was so fatally bad at music class that I wound up loathing it. I couldn't even play the recorder. My fingers wouldn't move. Never did learn to read music. How those little tadpoles relate to music baffled me. Of course, now you all think I was stupid, but my point is that I hated music for an awfully long time. There was a pressure involved in music at school, and a sort of pervasive attitude that "people who understand music are cool and have good taste," which all just made me go, "Forget that," and want to run. I wasn't able to listen to it properly until some ten years after I graduated—quite recently, actually. Now I feel like I was really missing out. Good taste has nothing to do with it; anyone can listen to good music…that whole attitude just pissed me off. I don't know what the goal of musical education was at school, but man, did it ever backfire with me. Story of my life.

When splendid, important people dispense pearls of wisdom like, "Value your imagination," or "Follow your dreams," why does it always make you want to throw up? Always makes me want to say, "Shut up and mind your own business," or "Screw imagination." I see a phrase like, "The power of imagination and positive thinking," and I want to start strapping bombs to people. I am what I am, and I'm not so good at being bright and merry. This causes me no end of trouble. I see everyone being cheery, and react like I've come across something incredibly sinister. Sure, I can laugh with everyone, but that creeps me out more than anything. Sigh…

But this is a perfect example of why “Dirty things are pretty” is so very true. If you run into something creepy, then you still have to do something, right? But in that case, I’ve got to make a case for “Pretty things are dirty” just to be fair…and the more I think about it, the more I want to do something like that, which is how I’m living today.

I think everyone is really much, much more simple and uncomplicated. We’re all just banging our heads into whatever is right in front of us, but the world seems to be getting along just fine. Banging our heads into things seems to work. Ain’t it a shame?

(Are you even trying to write an afterword?)
(Ah, whatever…)

BGM “THE GOOD LIFE”
by NEW POWER GENERATION

CHARACTER ROLL CALL
by chapter

One Year Earlier

Minahoshi Suiko/Imaginator (F)
Miyashita Touka/Boogiepop (F)

I

Asukai Jin (M)
Kasugai (F)
Kinukawa Kotoe (F)
Kinukawa Kotoe's Mother (F)
Kinukawa Kouji (M)
Skinhead (M)
Spooky E (M)
Suema Kazuko (
Tsuyoshi (M)

II

Kinukawa Kotoe (F)
Kirima Nagi (F)
Orihata Aya/Camille (F)
Spooky E (M)
Taniguchi Masaki/Boogiepop (M)

III

Asukai Jin (M)
Kitahara Misaki (F)
Kinukawa Kotoe (F)
Miyashita Touka/Boogiepop (F)
Suema Kazuko (F)

IV

Asukai Jin (M)
Kinukawa Kotoe (F)
Kirima Nagi (F)
Miyashita Touka/Boogiepop (F)

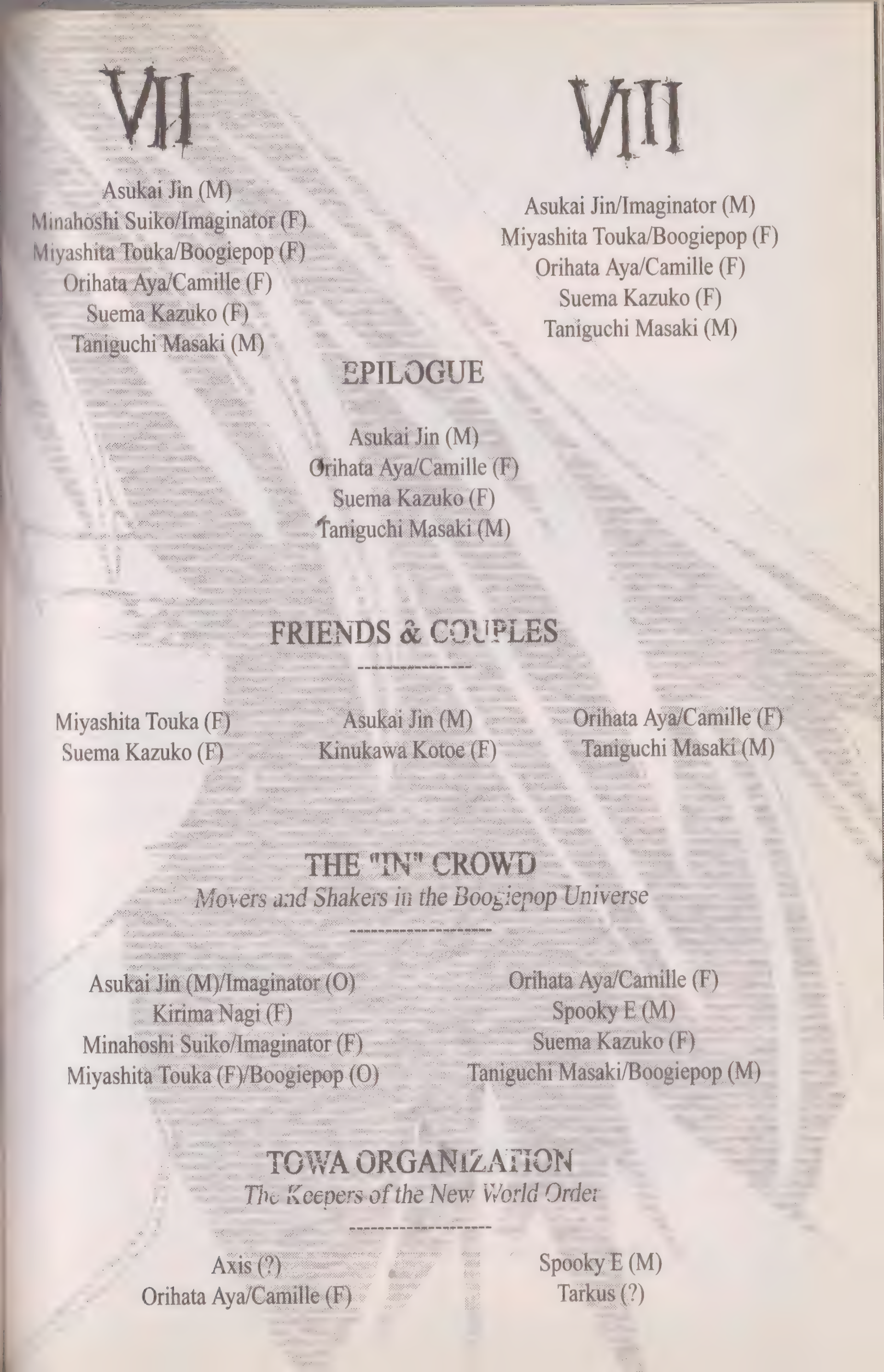
V

Asukai Jin/Imaginator (M)
Orihata Aya/Camille (F)
Spooky E (M)
Taniguchi Masaki (M)

VI

Asukai Jin/Imaginator (M)
Kinukawa Kotoe (F)
Kinukawa Kotoe's Mother (F)
Miyashita Touka/Boogiepop (F)
Orihata Aya/Camille (F)
Suema Kazuko (F)
Taniguchi Masaki (M)

(F) = female (M) = male (O) = other



VII

Asukai Jin (M)
Minahoshi Suiko/Imaginator (F)
Miyashita Touka/Boogiepop (F)
Orihata Aya/Camille (F)
Suema Kazuko (F)
Taniguchi Masaki (M)

VIII

Asukai Jin/Imaginator (M)
Miyashita Touka/Boogiepop (F)
Orihata Aya/Camille (F)
Suema Kazuko (F)
Taniguchi Masaki (M)

EPILOGUE

Asukai Jin (M)
Orihata Aya/Camille (F)
Suema Kazuko (F)
Taniguchi Masaki (M)

FRIENDS & COUPLES

Miyashita Touka (F)
Suema Kazuko (F)

Asukai Jin (M)
Kinukawa Kotoe (F)

Orihata Aya/Camille (F)
Taniguchi Masaki (M)

THE "IN" CROWD

Movers and Shakers in the Boogiepop Universe

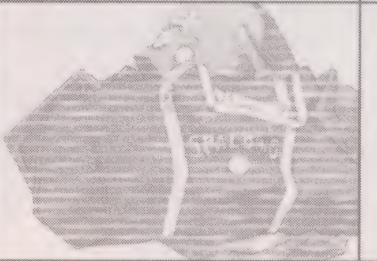
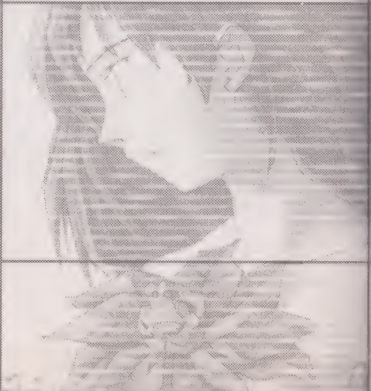
Asukai Jin (M)/Imaginator (O)
Kirima Nagi (F)
Minahoshi Suiko/Imaginator (F)
Miyashita Touka (F)/Boogiepop (O)
Orihata Aya/Camille (F)
Spooky E (M)
Suema Kazuko (F)
Taniguchi Masaki/Boogiepop (M)

TOWA ORGANIZATION

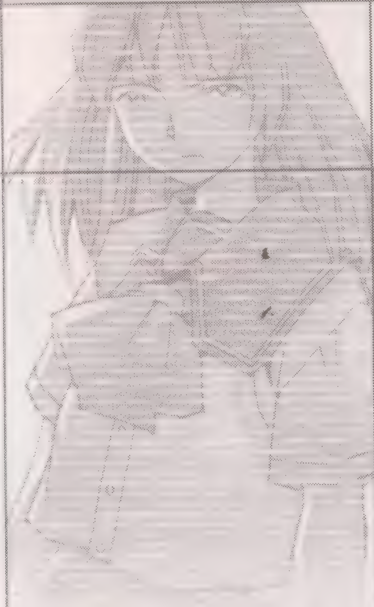
The Keepers of the New World Order

Axis (?)
Orihata Aya/Camille (F)
Spooky E (M)
Tarkus (?)

TIMELINE

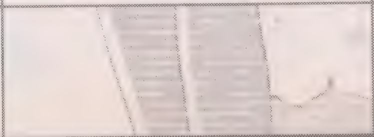
	BOOGIEPOP and Others	BOOGIEPOP Returns VS Imaginator PART 1
HIGH SCHOOL 1st YEAR		■ Minahoshi Suiko's suicide.
HIGH SCHOOL 2nd YEAR	■ Kamikishiro Naoko asks Tanaka Shiro out. ■ The Manticore escapes from the Towa Organization's laboratory. ■ Saotome Masami meets the Manticore and begins killing students. ■ Takeda Keiji sees Boogiepop in town. ■ Kamikishiro meets Echoes. ■ Kirima Naki begins seriously investigating. ■ Boogiepop faces off against the Manticore. ■ The pillar of light pierces the sky.	■ Asukai Jin meets the Imaginator. ■ Taniguchi Masaki meets and falls in love with Orihata Aya. ■ Boogiepop fights Spooky E. ■ Taniguchi Masaki encounters Spooky E, begins dressing as Boogiepop.
HIGH SCHOOL 3rd YEAR		
RONIN YEARS	■ Kimura Akio receives a letter from an unidentified sender.	

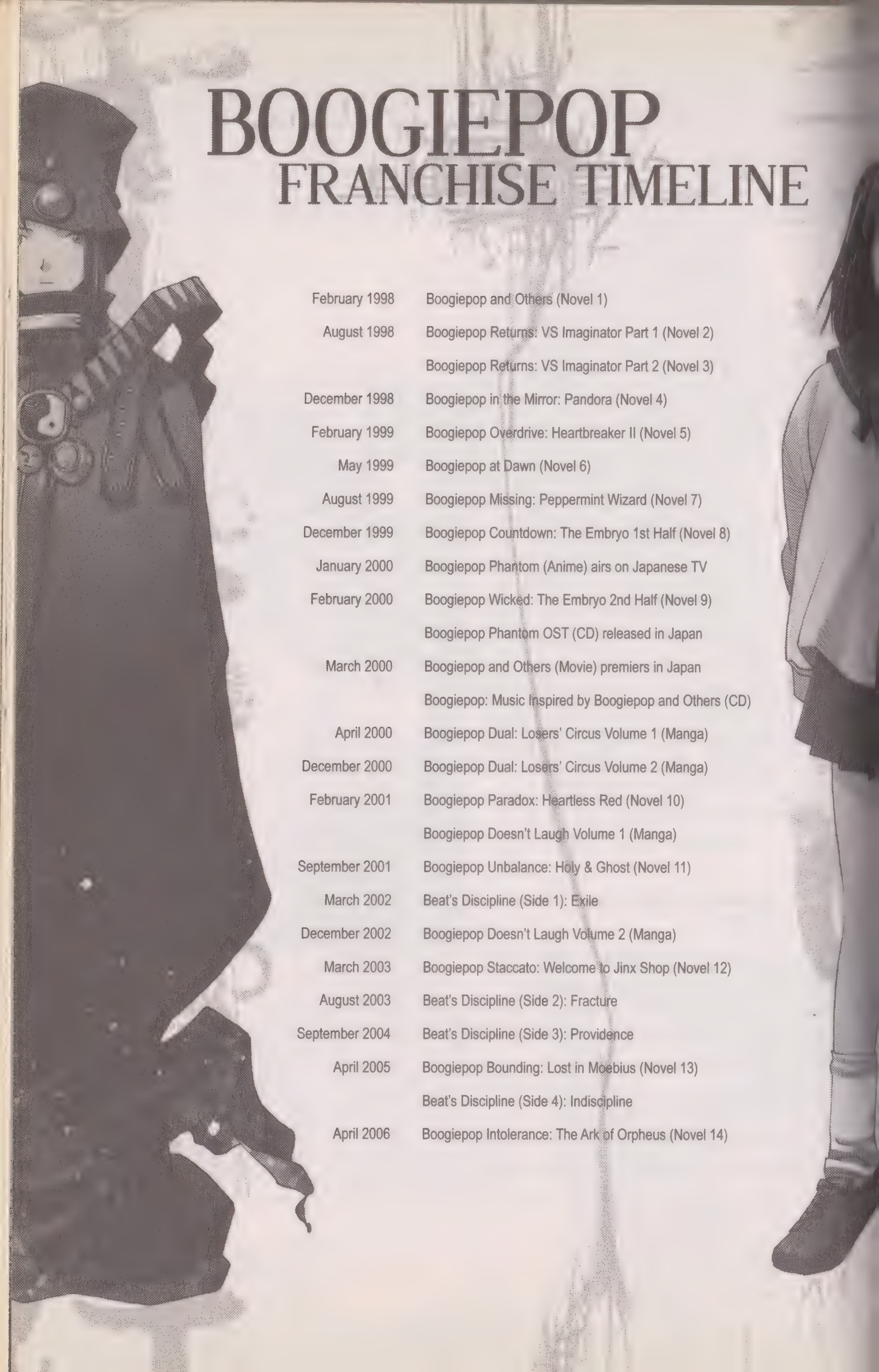
BOOGIEPOP Returns VS Imaginator PART 2



- Kinukawa Kotoe is brainwashed by Spooky E.

- Taniguchi Masaki runs away from home, flies solo as Boogiepop.
- Orihata Aya turns up missing.
- Kinukawa Kotoe hospitalized.
- Asukai Jin squares off against Spooky E; Spooky E commits suicide.
- Boogiepop faces off against the Imaginator.
- Taniguchi Masaki and Orihata Aya reunited.





BOOGIEPOP
FRANCHISE TIMELINE

February 1998	Boogiepop and Others (Novel 1)
August 1998	Boogiepop Returns: VS Imaginator Part 1 (Novel 2)
	Boogiepop Returns: VS Imaginator Part 2 (Novel 3)
December 1998	Boogiepop in the Mirror: Pandora (Novel 4)
February 1999	Boogiepop Overdrive: Heartbreaker II (Novel 5)
May 1999	Boogiepop at Dawn (Novel 6)
August 1999	Boogiepop Missing: Peppermint Wizard (Novel 7)
December 1999	Boogiepop Countdown: The Embryo 1st Half (Novel 8)
January 2000	Boogiepop Phantom (Anime) airs on Japanese TV
February 2000	Boogiepop Wicked: The Embryo 2nd Half (Novel 9)
	Boogiepop Phantom OST (CD) released in Japan
March 2000	Boogiepop and Others (Movie) premiers in Japan
	Boogiepop: Music Inspired by Boogiepop and Others (CD)
April 2000	Boogiepop Dual: Losers' Circus Volume 1 (Manga)
December 2000	Boogiepop Dual: Losers' Circus Volume 2 (Manga)
February 2001	Boogiepop Paradox: Heartless Red (Novel 10)
	Boogiepop Doesn't Laugh Volume 1 (Manga)
September 2001	Boogiepop Unbalance: Holy & Ghost (Novel 11)
March 2002	Beat's Discipline (Side 1): Exile
December 2002	Boogiepop Doesn't Laugh Volume 2 (Manga)
March 2003	Boogiepop Staccato: Welcome to Jinx Shop (Novel 12)
August 2003	Beat's Discipline (Side 2): Fracture
September 2004	Beat's Discipline (Side 3): Providence
April 2005	Boogiepop Bounding: Lost in Moebius (Novel 13)
	Beat's Discipline (Side 4): Indiscipline
April 2006	Boogiepop Intolerance: The Ark of Orpheus (Novel 14)

TRANSLATION NOTES

Translating a foreign language work is a challenging task that can result in a lot of sleepless nights and headaches for the production team involved. The general rule of thumb for any English-language release is to make sure that it retains the intricacies of the source material, while not reading like a literal translation. It's a difficult line to walk, but we at Seven Seas believe that preserving cultural nuance is of utmost importance.

For this reason, we've strived to present a translation that is as close to the original as possible, while keeping the flow of the novel intact. The following pages of translation notes are presented here as a way to offer some additional insight into many of the terms, characters and other cultural items that you may not have understood while reading the novel. These notes also offer a further look into some of the choices that the editorial staff at Seven Seas had to make while bringing the work to you. Enjoy!

The Prince Connection

If it hasn't become clear from reading the first three *Boogiepop* novels, it should be pointed out that *Boogiepop* creator and author Kouhei Kadono is a huge music fan. This is evidenced in everything from Boogiepop whistling Wagner's "Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg" to many of the character names and chapter titles found throughout the books. In fact, it is this last point that we'd like to comment on.

In the translation note section of *Boogiepop Returns: VS Imaginator Part 1*, we explained that the 1936 movie entitled *Camille* starring Greta Garbo seemed to thematically relate to Orihata Aya's character. While this is still a valid explanation, as Kadono-sensei does make numerous other literary and movie references in his novels, *Gomanga.com* forum user "Elric of Grans" was kind enough to point out a much simpler explanation—"Prince [the singer/songwriter] claims to have a personality that he calls 'Camille,' who wished to prove his critics wrong, and another called 'Spooky Electric,' who urged him to create The Black Album."

With that knowledge in mind, it's easy to see even more Prince references jump right out. *Boogiepop Returns: VS Imaginator Part 1* uses the Prince song titles "Sometimes it snows in April" and "If I was your Girlfriend" as interior titles, while *Boogiepop Returns: VS Imaginator Part 2* has "Do U Lie?" and "The Sacrifice of Victor." What's more, all of these individual titles have an impact on the novels themselves, as they tie into the events thematically. It makes you wonder what other clever references are still to come.

Chapter 1

Onigiri

Rice balls, which actually tend to be triangle-shaped. They are usually wrapped in seaweed and stuffed with either fish flakes, pickled plums, or other condiments. (pg.31)

Tarkus

Tarkus is clearly a Towa Organization Agent—although a very underused one, as he hasn't shown up in later novels. Could "Tarkus" be a sly reference to musical group Emerson Lake and Palmer's second album? You decide. (pg.34)

Paisley Park

Yet another clever Prince reference. As *Boogiepop* fan "Scintilla" points out, "Paisley Park is the name of a studio complex Prince had built near his home." (pg.36)

Dance Club

Literally a "live house" in Japanese, this type of establishment is the sort of bar where bands play. We opted to use the term dance club to clearly convey the setting, but keep in mind that a 'club' in Japan tends to be of the bar hostess variety. (pg.45)

Chapter II

I must save Masaki

Aya's original Japanese chant was unworkable in English. In Japanese, she actually whispers: "Masaki dake wa" ("Only Masaki") over and over, and at the end, she adds: "Tasukenakya" ("I have to save.") We could have reversed this and have the chant read, "I have to save" over and over, with "Masaki" at the end, but the repetition of Masaki's name here is important to the meaning of this passage. Hence, we translated it as, "I must save Masaki." (pg.63)

Shishou

In case Masaki's usage of the term *shishou* isn't clear, it means "master teacher." (pg.68)

Chapter III

Best. Typo. Ever.

Sometimes, even editors can make mistakes. That's why it's always a good idea to have a proofreader watching your back, as evidenced by this hilarious goof:

> "I have already been saved by someone else!" I shouted.
> Asukai Jin frowned. "Oh? Who?"
> "B-noogiepop!"

Chapter V

Standardize

Andrew is quite proud of this term, but it is worth mentioning that in Japanese, he specifically said he was going to make every human psychologically identical; it's a neat phrase, but not nearly as concise. "Put all human psyches in the same condition" would be the most literal translation. (pg.140)

Harite

A move from sumo where you slap the side of your opponent's face with an open hand. (pg.140)

Anti-Magnetic Sheets

Okay, this seems to be a made-up term, but since googling it produces an alarming number of sites dedicated to Asukai Jin/Spooky E slash fiction…one can never be too sure. (pg.141)

Chapter VI

Calorie Mate

Tasteless, extremely dry cookie-like bars containing a lot of calories and a balanced range of vitamins. Needless to say…they are *horrible*. (pg.154)

Chapter VII

Followers

When Asukai Jin answers the phone to which only his followers know the number, the word used here is actually *nakama*, which means friends, comrades, or companions. However, those words in English make it unclear as to who is calling, so the word "followers" was substituted. (pg.176)

Mosh Pit

The original analogy here was "*oshikuramanju*," which many Japanese to English dictionaries list as "to play push and shove." It appears to be a game where a group of people stand very close to each other and shove one another. Except, in this book, aren't these people sprawled out and lying on their sides? (pg.186)

Sun Tzu

Boogiepop references the great Chinese strategist Sun Tzu and author of *The Art of War* with the quote, "Everything is already decided before the battle even begins."

Also, "Sun Tzu" is a Chinese pronunciation. When the Japanese see the kanji for his name, they have their own reading, which is "Sonshi." Because there are tons of other meanings for "son" and "shi," it is often used as the basis for more than a few jokes. (pg.195)

Leave it to the experts

When referring to the Towa Organization picking up the canisters, Boogiepop actually says, "*Mochi wa mochiya*," or "Leave mochi to the mochi makers." Mochi is a soft and sticky rice treat, but as that particular line sounds like an incredibly strange thing to say, we choose to substitute a suitable alternative that the average reader would be instantly able to understand—"Best to leave it to the experts." (pg.199)

Chapter VIII

Terre des Hommes

The quote by Antoine De Saint-Exupéry on Chapter VIII's title page is taken from his work *Terre des Hommes*, which was translated into English as *Wind, Sand and Stars*. In the English translation of this book, the passage in question reads as follows: "And I, in my turn, shall recognize you in the faces of all mankind. You came towards me in an aureole of charity and magnanimity bearing the gift of water. All my friends and all my enemies marched towards me in your person. It did not seem to me that you were rescuing me: rather did it seem that you were forgiving me. And I felt I had no enemy left in all the world."

As you can see, there is quite a noticeable difference between the above version and the one we used. In the case of this quote, the original novel *Terre des Hommes* was translated into English from French, but in our case, we have a passage that was translated from French into Japanese and then into English. Thematically, the wording in the English version is so different from the Japanese version that it no longer seems to relate to the themes present in the *Boogiepop Returns: VS Imaginator* novels. For this reason, we have decided to go with our own version of the quote to remain accurate to Kouhei Kadono's original thematic interpretation of the passage. (pg.205)

Special Omake

The Original Japanese Novel Blurbs

As in many cases, what was originally written to plug a book's Japanese release gets revised and changed to better suit the title's needs in foreign markets. In the case of *Boogiepop*, the original novel blurbs are a little bizarre, but they do act as an extension of the books themselves, giving further insight into the contents contained therein. In the case of the second novel, the blurb literally provides the best definition of what the Imaginator actually is. Likewise, the description for the first novel is the only hint we are ever given of the book's original title—*Boogiepop Doesn't Dream*.

BOOGIEPOP AND OTHERS

Do you have a dream? Sadly, I have no such thing. But the boys and girls in this story all have their own desires. They fret; unable to reach them, or launch themselves headlong towards that goal. Some remain uncertain what it is they truly want, others chase a desire they can never really hope to achieve, or unwittingly give others courage with their unconscious optimism.

This story is told in pieces. It's a very creepy story, and a little bit sad.

—Mm? Who am I? My name is Boogiepop…

Winner of the Game Novel Grand Prize.

Kouhei Kadono brings you five unusual stories of one uncanny event.

BOOGIEPOP RETURNS: VS IMAGINATOR PART 1

Have you ever thought there was something missing inside of you? Have you ever worried you were lacking something everyone else had? Have you ever hoped someone would come along who could make up for your flaws?

You don't need to worry about that anymore. That time is coming. A new possibility is dawning, a time that will end all suffering. If my enemy, Boogiepop, does not interfere…

Me? Well, my enemies call me the Imaginator…

The winner of the fourth Dengeki Game Novel Grand Prize, Kouhei Kadono, delivers an all-new work on an even larger scale!

Can you escape from the clutches of the Imaginator…?

BOOGIEPOP RETURNS: VS IMAGINATOR PART 2

Do you have anything you simply must do? Something you've convinced yourself is the only way? Have you ever even seriously considered if this is really important to you?

If you believe that no matter what you do, you must do it well, then so be it. But if that springs not from your needs or desires, but is simply powered by momentum, then you may already be in the Imaginator's grasp. If so, I, Boogiepop will appear before you as many times as it takes, until a resolution is reached——

The much anticipated new work from Kouhei Kadono, recipient of the Game novel Grand Prize.

Will you be saved by Boogiepop? Or…

Special Omake

The Original Creator Bios

As with the original novel blurbs, the original Japanese novels included a series of creator biographies that differ from the versions found in our release. In this case, we opted to create a series of biographies for writer Kouhei Kadono and illustrator Kouji Ogata that actually served to give greater insight into their individual careers and the works they have each been involved with.

For the release of the third Boogiepop novel, we'd like to present the original author biographies for Kouhei Kadono and Kouji Ogata as they appeared with the original Japanese novels. In the case of Kouji Ogata, he simply has one bio that is used with each of the three novels. However, Kouhei Kadono actually has three variations. Enjoy!

Kouhei Kadono's Bio as seen in *Boogiepop and Others*

Born 1968. Grew up, still confused, spent some time frittering his life away before somehow ending up writing novels. That kind of guy. Favorite words, "There is no 'absolute' in this world." Additionally, he is [male, symbol]. Blood type is O, Sagittarius (Not a misprint).

Kouhei Kadono's Bio as seen in *Boogiepop Returns: VS Imaginator Part 1*

Born 1968. Grew up somehow, flailed through life till he somehow began writing novels, and won the grand prize, god knows why. Often told as a child, "You've got eyes like a fish, can't tell where you're looking." (To be continued in *Part 2*)

Kouhei Kadono's Bio as seen in *Boogiepop Returns: VS Imaginator Part 2*

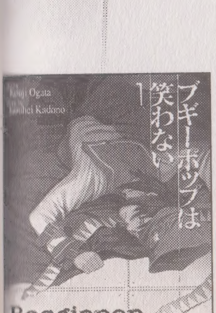
(Continued from *Part 1*) Someone else asked me why I was glaring at everyone. I didn't think anything of it at the time, so I don't know which of them was right. Favorite words, "There is no 'absolute' in this world." Gender is [male, symbol]. Blood type is O, Sagittarius (Not a misprint).

Kouji Ogata's Bio as seen in the first three *Boogiepop* novels

Born 1970. Osaka Resident. Barely managed to get enough credits to graduate Osaka Design School. Did a lot of things after that, which brings us to the present. Enjoys motorcycles, tennis, and remote controlled models. A rising star with a distinctive, eye-catching art style.

Boogiepop Doesn't Laugh © KOUHEI KADONO/MEDIAWORKS

It's time to see what
you've been missing...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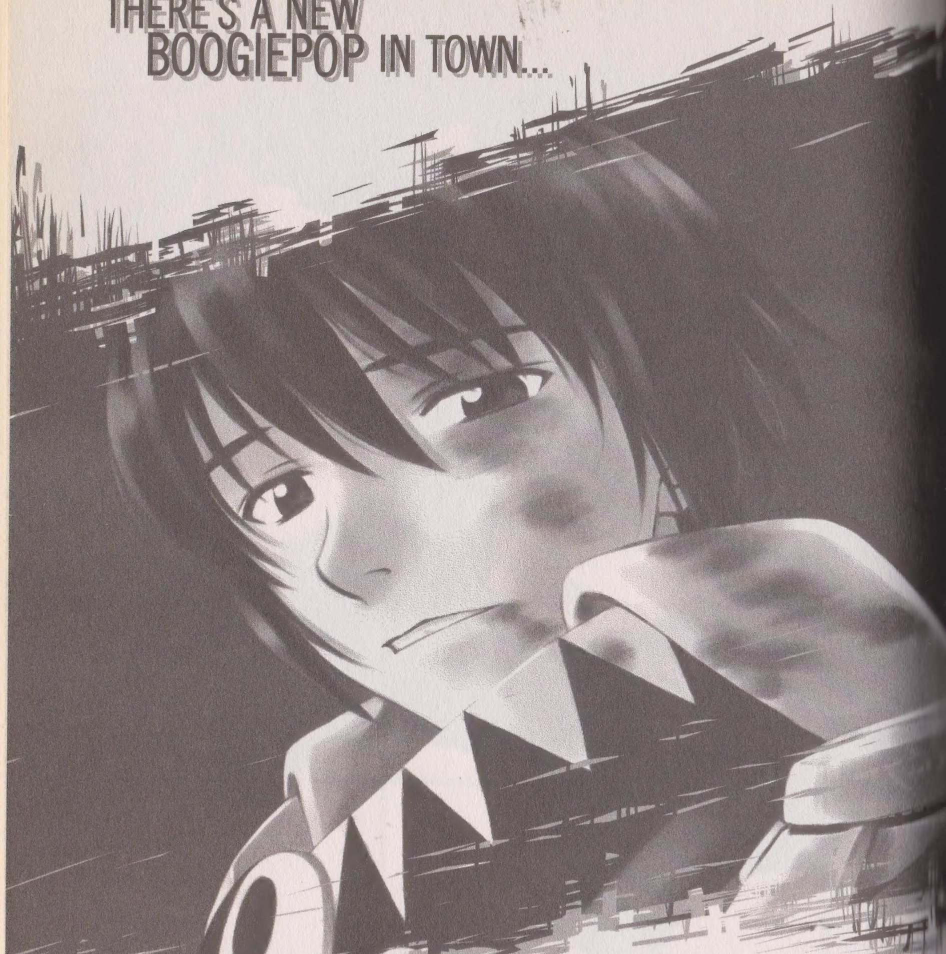

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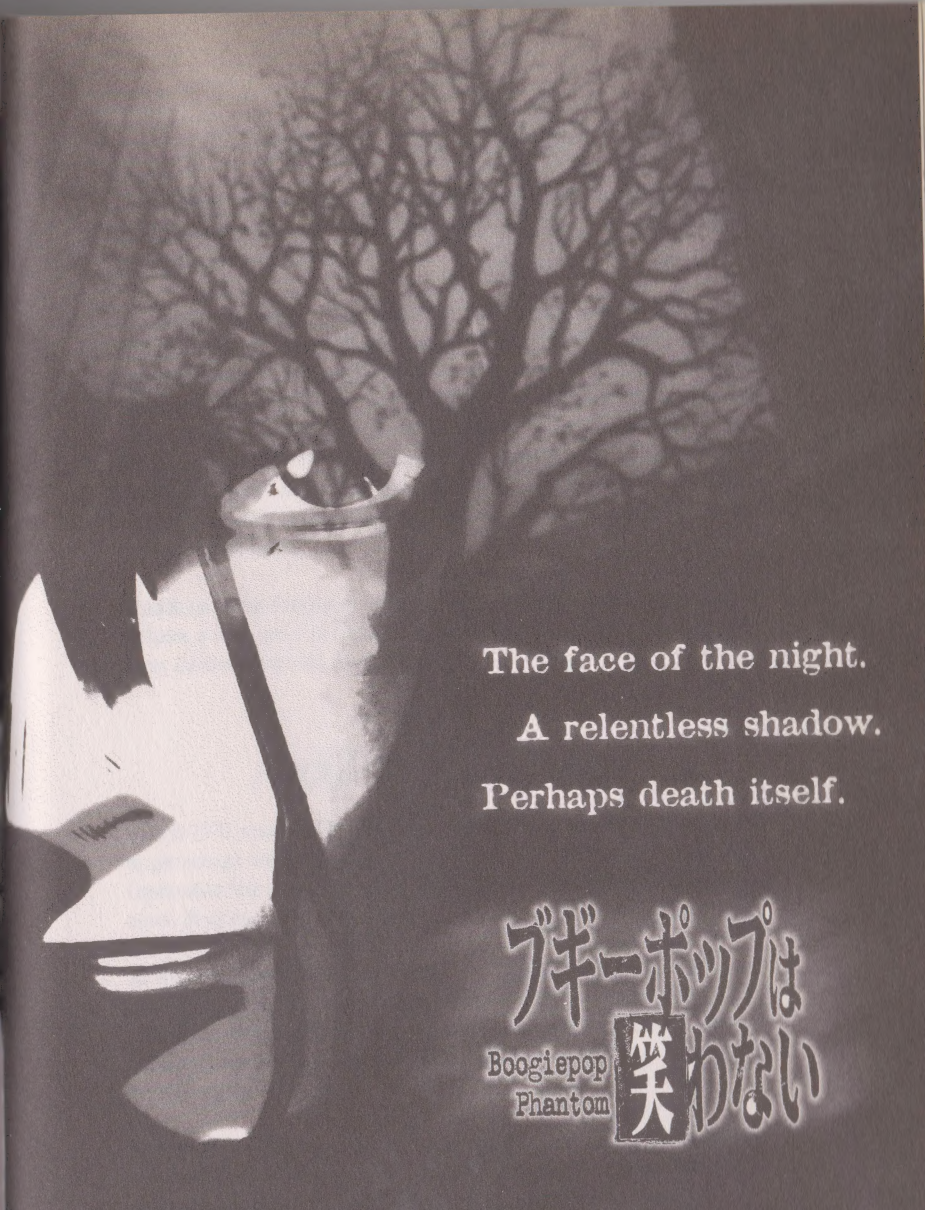
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A relentless shadow.
Perhaps death itself.
ブギーポップは笑わない
Boogiepop Phantom

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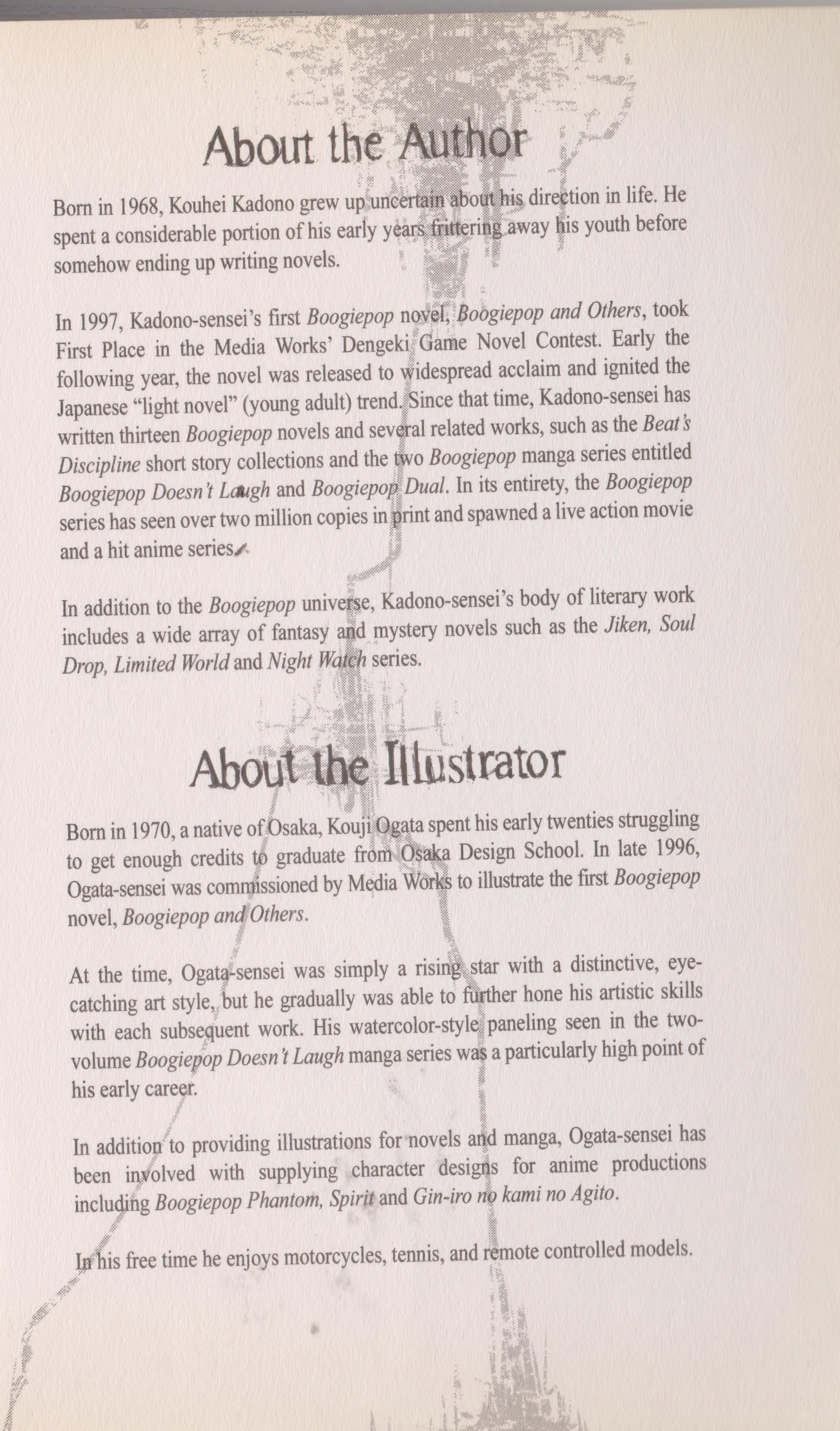

About the Author

Born in 1968, Kouhei Kadono grew up uncertain about his direction in life. He spent a considerable portion of his early years frittering away his youth before somehow ending up writing novels.

In 1997, Kadono-sensei's first *Boogiepop* novel, *Boogiepop and Others*, took First Place in the Media Works' Dengeki Game Novel Contest. Early the following year, the novel was released to widespread acclaim and ignited the Japanese "light novel" (young adult) trend. Since that time, Kadono-sensei has written thirteen *Boogiepop* novels and several related works, such as the *Beat's Discipline* short story collections and the two *Boogiepop* manga series entitled *Boogiepop Doesn't Laugh* and *Boogiepop Dual*. In its entirety, the *Boogiepop* series has seen over two million copies in print and spawned a live action movie and a hit anime series.

In addition to the *Boogiepop* universe, Kadono-sensei's body of literary work includes a wide array of fantasy and mystery novels such as the *Jiken, Soul Drop, Limited World* and *Night Watch* series.

About the Illustrator

Born in 1970, a native of Osaka, Kouji Ogata spent his early twenties struggling to get enough credits to graduate from Osaka Design School. In late 1996, Ogata-sensei was commissioned by Media Works to illustrate the first *Boogiepop* novel, *Boogiepop and Others*.

At the time, Ogata-sensei was simply a rising star with a distinctive, eye-catching art style, but he gradually was able to further hone his artistic skills with each subsequent work. His watercolor-style paneling seen in the two-volume *Boogiepop Doesn't Laugh* manga series was a particularly high point of his early career.

In addition to providing illustrations for novels and manga, Ogata-sensei has been involved with supplying character designs for anime productions including *Boogiepop Phantom, Spirit* and *Gin-iro no kami no Agito*.

In his free time he enjoys motorcycles, tennis, and remote controlled models.